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Children
# of the
Whirlwind

LEROY SCOTT

CHILDREN OF THE WHIRLWIND

CHILDREN OF THE WHIRLWIND

BY

LEROY SCOTT

AUTHOR OF "A DAUGHTER OF TWO WORLDS,"
"MARY REGAN," "NO. 13 WASHINGTON SQUARE," ETC.

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CHILDREN OF THE WHIRLWIND

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CHILDREN OF THE WHIRLWIND

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CHAPTER I

It was an uninspiring bit of street: narrow, paved with cobble; hot and noisy in summer, reeking with unwholesome mud during the drizzling and snow-slimed months of winter. It looked anything this May afternoon except a starting-place for drama. But, then, the great dramas of life often avoid the splendid estates and trappings with which conventional romance would equip them, and have their beginnings in unlikeliest environment; and thence sweep on to a noble, consuming tragedy, or to a glorious unfolding of souls. Life is a composite of contradictions — a puzzle to the wisest of us: the lily lifting its graceful purity aloft may have its roots in a dunghill. Samson's dead lion putrefying by a roadside is ever and again being found to be a storehouse of wild honey. We are too accustomed to the ordinary and the obvious to consider that beauty or worth may, after bitter travail, grow out of that which is ugly and unpromising.

Thus no one who looked on Maggie Carlisle and Larry Brainard at their beginnings, had even a guess what manner of persons were to develop from them or what their stories were to be.

The houses on the bit of street were all three-storied and all of a uniform, dingy, scaling redness. The house of the Duchess, on the left side as you came down the street toward the little Square which squatted beside the East River, differed from the others only in that three balls of tarnished gilt swung before it and unredeemed pledges emanated a weakly lure from behind its dirt-streaked windows, and also in that the personality of the Duchess gave the house something of a character of its own.

The street did business with her when pressed for funds; but it knew little definite about the Duchess except that she was shriveled and bent and almost wordless and was seemingly without emotions. But of course there were rumors. She was so old, and had been so long in the drab little street, that she was as much a legend as a real person. No one knew exactly how she had come by the name of "Duchess." There were misty, unsupported stories that long, long ago she had been a favorite in burlesque, and that this shriveled being had been a shapely and royal figure in colored fleshings, and that her title had been given her in those her ruling days. Also there was a vague story that she had come by the name through an old liking for the romances of that writer who put forth her, or his, or their, prolific extravagances under the exalted pseudonym of "The Duchess." Also there was a rumor that the title came from a former alleged habit of the Duchess of carrying beneath her shapeless dress a hoard of jewels worthy to be a duchy's heirlooms. But all these were just stories — no more. Down in this quarter of New York nicknames come easily, and once applied they adhere to the end.

Some believed that she was now the mere ashes of a woman, in whom lived only the last flickering spark. And some believed that beneath that drab and spent appearance there smouldered a great fire, which might blaze forth upon some occasion. But no one knew. As she was now, so she had always been even in the memory of people considered old in the neighborhood.

Beside the fact that she ran a pawnshop, which was reputed to be also a fence, there were only two or three other facts that were known to her neighbors. One was that in the far past there had been a daughter, and that while still a very young girl this daughter had disappeared. It was rumored that the Duchess had placed the daughter in a convent and that later the girl had married; but the daughter had never appeared again in the quarter. Another fact was that there was a grandson, a handsome young devil, who had come down occasionally to visit his grandmother, until he began his involuntary sojourn at Sing Sing. Another fact — this one the best known of all — was that two or three years before an impudent, willful young girl named Maggie Carlisle had come to live with her.

It was rather a meager history. People wondered and talked of mystery. But perhaps the only mystery arose from the fact that the Duchess was the kind of woman who never volunteered information about her affairs, and the kind even the boldly curious hesitate to question. . . .

And down here it was, in this unlovely street, in the Duchess's unlovely house, that the drama of Maggie Carlisle and Larry Brainard began its unpromising and stormy career: for, though they had thought of it little, their forebears had been sowers of the wind, they themselves had sown some of that careless seed and were to sow yet more — and there was to be the reaping of that seed's wild crop.

CHAPTER II

WHEN Maggie entered the studio on the Duchess's third floor, the big, red-haired, unkempt painter roared his rebukes at her. She stiffened, and in the resentment of her proud youth did not even offer an explanation. Nodding to her father and Barney Palmer, she silently crossed to the window and stood sullenly gazing over the single mongrel tree before the house and down the narrow street and across the little Square, at the swirling black tide which raced through East River. That painter was a beast! Yes, and a fool!

But quickly the painter was forgotten, and once more her mind reverted to Larry — at last Larry was coming back! — only to have the painter, after a minute, interrupt her excited imagination with:

"What's the matter with your tongue, Maggie? Generally you stab back with it quick enough."

She turned, still sulky and silent, and gazed with cynical superiority at the easel. "Nuts" — it was Barney Palmer who had thus lightly rechristened the painter when he had set up his studio in the attic above the pawnshop six months before — Nuts was transferring the seamy, cunning face of her father, "Old Jimmie" Carlisle, to the canvas with swift, unhesitating strokes.

"For the lova Christ and the twelve apostles, including that piker Judas," woefully intoned Old Jimmie from the model's chair, "lemme get down off this platform!"

"Move and I'll wipe my palette off on that Mardi Gras vest of yours!" grunted the big painter autocratically through his mouthful of brushes.

"O God — and I got a cramp in my back, and my neck's gone to sleep!" groaned Old Jimmie, leaning forward on his cane. "Daughter, dear" — plaintively to Maggie — "what is the crazy gentleman doing to me?"

"It's an awful smear, father." Maggie spoke slightingly, but with a tone of doubt. It was not the sort of picture that eighteen has been taught to like — yet the picture did possess an intangible something that provoked doubt as to its quality. "You sure do look one old burglar!"

"Not a cheap burglar?" — hopefully.

"Naw!" exploded the man at the easel in his big voice, first taking the brushes from his mouth. "You're a swell-looking old pirate! — ready to loot the sub-treasury and then scuttle the old craft with all hands on board! A breathing, speaking, robbing likeness!"

"Maggie's right, and Nuts's right," put in Barney Palmer. "It's sure a rotten picture, and then again it sure looks like you, Jimmie."

The smartly dressed Barney — Barney could not keep away from Broadway tailors and haberdashers with their extravagant designs and color schemes — dismissed the insignificant matter of the portrait, and resumed the really important matter which had brought him to her.

"Are you certain, Maggie, that the Duchess has n't heard from Larry?"

"If she has, she has n't mentioned it. But why don't you ask her yourself?"

"I did, but she would n't say a thing. You can't get a word out of the Duchess with a jimmy, unless she wants to talk — and she never wants to talk." He turned his sharp, narrowly set eyes upon the lean old man. "It's got me guessing, Jimmie. Larry was due out of Sing Sing yesterday, and we have n't had a peep from him, and though she won't talk I'm sure he has n't been here to see his grandmother."

"Sure is funny," agreed Old Jimmie. "But mebbe Larry has broke straight into a fresh game and is playing a lone hand. He's a quick worker, Larry is — and he's got nerve."

"Well, whatever's keeping him we're tied up till Larry comes." Barney turned back to Maggie. "I say, sister, how about robing yourself in your raiment of joy and coming with yours truly to a palace of jazz, there to dine and show the populace what real dancing is?"

"Can't, Barney. Mr. Hunt" — the name given the painter at his original christening — "asked the Duchess and me to have dinner up here. He's to cook it himself."

"For your sake I hope he cooks better than he paints." And sliding down in his chair until he rested upon a more comfortable vertebra, the elegant Barney lit a monogrammed cigarette, and with idle patience swung his bamboo stick.

"You're half an hour late, Maggie," Hunt began at her again in his rumbling voice. "Can't stand for such a waste of my time!"

"How about my time?" retorted Maggie, who indeed had a grievance. "I was supposed to have the day off, but instead I had to carry that tray of cigarettes around till the last person in the Ritzmore had finished lunch. Anyhow," she added, "I don't see that your time's worth so much when you spend it on such painty messes as these."

"It's not up to you to tell me what my time's worth!" retorted Hunt. "I pay you — that's enough for you! . . . Because you weren't on time, I stuck Old Jimmie out there to finish off this picture. I'll be through with the old cut-throat in ten minutes. Be ready to take his place."

"All right," said Maggie sulkily.

For all his roaring she was not much afraid of the painter. While his brushes flicked at, and streaked across, the canvas she stood idly watching him. He was in paint-smeared, baggy trousers and a soft shirt whose open collar gave a glimpse of a deep chest matted with hair and whose rolled-up sleeves revealed forearms that seemed absurdly large to be fiddling with those slender sticks. A crowbar would have seemed more in harmony. He was unromantically old — all of thirty-five Maggie guessed; and with his square, rough-hewn face and tousled, reddish hair he was decidedly ugly. But for the fact that he really did work — though of course his work was foolish — and the fact that he paid his way —

he bought little, but no one could beat him by so much as a penny in a bargain, not even the Duchess — Maggie might have considered him as one of the many bums who floated purposelessly through that drab region.

Also, had there not been so many queer people coming and going in this neighborhood — Eads Howe, the hobo millionaire, settlement workers, people who had grown rich and old in their business and preferred to live near it —Maggie might have regarded Hunt with more curiosity, and even with suspicion; but down here one accepted queer people as a matter of course, the only fear being that secretly they might be police or government agents, which Maggie and the others knew very well Hunt was not. When Hunt had rented this attic as a studio they had accepted his explanation that he had taken it because it was cheap and he could afford to pay no more. Likewise they had accepted his explanation that he was a mechanic by trade who had roughed it all over the world and was possessed with an itch for painting, that lately he had worked in various garages, that it was his habit to hoard his money till he got a bit ahead and then go off on a painting spree. All these admissions were indubitably plausible, for his paintings seemed the unmistakable handiwork of an irresponsible, hard-fisted motor mechanic.

Maggie shifted to her other foot and glanced casually at the canvases which leaned against the walls of the shabby studio. There was the Duchess: incredibly old, the face a web of wrinkles, the lips indrawn over toothless and shrunken gums, the nose a thin, curved beak, the eyes deep-set, gleaming, inscrutable, watching; and drawn tight over the hair — even Maggie did not know whether that hair was a wig or the Duchess's — the faded Oriental shawl which was fastened beneath her chin and which fell over her thin, bent chest. There was O'Flaherty, the good-natured policeman on the beat. There was the old watchmaker next door. There was Black Hurley, the notorious gang leader, who sometimes swaggered into the district like a dirty and evil feudal lord. There was a Jewish pushcart peddler, white-bearded and skull-capped. There was an Italian mother sitting on the curb, her feet in the gutter, smiling down at the baby that was hungrily suckling at her milk-heavy breast. And so on, and so on. Just the ordinary, uninteresting things Maggie saw around the block. There was not a single pretty picture in the lot.

Hunt swung the canvas from his easel and stood it against the wall. "That'll be all for you, Jimmie. Beat it and make room for Maggie. Maggie, take your same pose."

Old Jimmie ambled forward and gazed at his portrait as Hunt was settling an unfinished picture on his easel. It had rather amused Jimmie and filled in his idle time to sit for the crazy painter; and, incidentally, another picture of him would do him no particular harm since the police already had all the pictures they needed of him over at Headquarters. As he gazed at Hunt's work Old Jimmie snickered.

"I say, Nuts, what you goin' to do with this mess of paint?"

"Going to sell it to the Metropolitan Museum, you old sinner!" snapped Hunt.

Old Jimmie cackled at the joke. He knew pictures; that is, good pictures. He had had an invisible hand in more than one clever transaction in which handsome pictures alleged to have been smuggled in, Gainsboroughs and Romneys and such (there had been most profit for him in handling the forgeries of these particular masters), had been put, with an air of great secrecy, into the hands of divers newly rich gentlemen who believed they were getting masterpieces at bargain prices through this evasion of customs laws.

"Nuts," chuckled Old Jimmie, "this junk would n't be so funny if you did n't seem to believe you were really painting."

"Junk! Funny!" Hunt swung around, one big hand closed about Jimmie's lean neck and the other seized his lean shoulder. "You grandfather of the devil and all his male progeny, you talk like that and I'll chuck you through the window!"

Old Jimmie grinned. The grip of the big hands of the painter, though powerful, was light. They all knew that the loud ravings of the painter never presaged violence. They had grown to like him, to accept him as almost one of themselves; though of course they looked down upon him with amused pity for his imbecility regarding his paintings.

"Get out of here," continued Hunt, "or cut out all this noise that comes from your having a brain that rattles. I've got to work."

Hunt turned again to his easel, and Old Jimmie, still grinning, lowered himself into a chair, lit a cigar, and winked at Barney. Hunt, with brush poised, regarded Maggie a moment.

"You there, Maggie," he ordered, "chin up a bit more, some flash in your eyes, more pep in your bearing — as though you were asking all the dames of the Winter Garden, and the Charity Ball, and the Horse Show, and that gang of tea-swilling women at the Ritzmore you sell cigarettes to — as though you were asking them all who the dickens they think they are . . . O God, can't you do anything!"

"I'm doing the best I can, and I look more like those dames than you look like a painter!"

"Shut up! I'm paying you a dollar an hour to pose, not to talk back to me. And you'd have more respect for my money if you knew how hard I had to work to earn it: carrying a motor car around in each hand. Wash off that scowl and try to look as I said . . . There, that's better. Hold it."

He began to paint rapidly, with quick glances back and forth between the canvas and Maggie. Maggie's dress was just the ordinary shirt-waist and skirt that the shop-girl and her sisters wear; Hunt had ordered it so. She was above the medium height, with thick black hair tinted with shadowy blue, long dark lashes, dark scimitars of eyebrows, a full, firm mouth, a nose with just the right tilt to it — all effective points for Hunt in what he wished to do. But what had attracted him most and given him his idea was her look; hardly pertness, or impudence — rather a cynical, mature, defiant certainty in herself.

Erect in her cheap shirt-waist, she gazed off into space with a smiling, confident challenge to all the world. Hunt was trying to make his picture a true portrait—and also make it a symbol of many things which still were only taking shape in his own mind: of beauty rising from the gutter to overcome beauty of more favored birth, and to reign above it; also of a lower stratum surging up and breaking through the upper stratum, becoming a part of it, or assimilating it, or conquering it. Leading families replaced by other families, classes replaced by other classes, nations replaced by other nations — such was the inevitable social process — so read the records of the fifty or sixty centuries since history began to be written. Oh, he was trying to say a lot in this portrait of a girl of ordinary birth — even less than ordinary — in her cheap shirt-waist and skirt!

And it pleased the sardonic element in Hunt's unmoral nature that this Maggie, through whom he was trying to symbolize so much, he knew to be a petty larcenist: shoplifting and matters of similar consequence. She had been cynically frank about this to him; casual, almost boastful. Her possessing a bent toward such activities was hardly to be wondered at, with her having Old Jimmie as her father, and the Duchess as a landlady, and having for acquaintances such gentlemen as Barney Palmer and this returning prison-bird, Larry Brainard.

But petty crime, thought Hunt, would not be Maggie's forte if she developed her possibilities. With her looks, her boldness, her cleverness, she had the makings of a magnificent adventuress. As he painted, he wondered what she was going to do, and become; and he watched her not only with a painter's eye intent upon the present, but with keen speculation upon the future.

CHAPTER III

Presently Hunt's mind shifted to Larry Brainard, whom Barney Palmer and Old Jimmie Carlisle had come here to see. Hunt had a mind curious about every thing and every one; and blustering, bullying creature though he was, he had the gift, possessed by but few, of audaciously thrusting himself into other people's affairs without arousing their resentment. He was keen to learn Maggie's attitude toward Larry; and he spoke not so much to gain knowledge of Larry as to draw her out.

"This Larry — what sort of chap is he, Maggie?" As with most artists, talking did not interfere with Hunt's painting.

Warm color slowly tinted Maggie's cheeks. "He's clever," she said positively. "You already know that. But I was only a girl when he was sent away."

Hunt smiled at her idea of her present maturity, implied by her last sentence. "But you lived with the Duchess for a year before he was sent away. You must have seen a lot of him, and got to know him well."

"Oh, he used to come down now and then to see his grandmother — I was only fifteen or sixteen then — just a girl, and he did n't pay much attention to me. Father can tell you better just how smart he is."

Old Jimmie spoke up promptly. He knew Hunt was not a police stool, and he liked the painter as much as it was in him to like any man; so he felt none of the reserve or caution that might have controlled him in other company.

"You bet Larry's smart! Got the quickest brain of any con man in the business — and him only about twenty-seven now. Some think I'm a smooth proposition myself, but Larry puts it all over me. That's why I'm willing to let him be my boss. He's a wonder at thinking up new stunts, and then at working out safe new ways of putting them across."

"But the police landed him at last," commented Hunt.

"Yes, but that was only because another man muffed his end of the job."

The handsome Barney Palmer had been restless during Old Jimmie's eulogy. "Oh, Larry's all to the good — but he's not the only party that's got real ideas."

"Huh!" grunted Old Jimmie. "But you'll remember that we have n't put over any big ones since Larry's been in stir."

"That's been because you would n't listen to any of my ideas!" retorted Barney. "And I handed out some peaches."

Even during the period of Larry's active reign it had irked Barney to accept another man as leader, and it had irked him even more during the interregnum while Larry was guest of the State. For Barney believed in his own Napoleonic strain.

"Don't let yourself get sore, Barney," Old Jimmie said appeasingly. "You'll have plenty of chances to try out your ideas as the main guy before you cash in. You know the outfit wanted to lay low for a while, anyhow. But we'll be putting over a lot of the big stuff when Larry gets out."

Hunt had noted a quick light come into Maggie's dark eyes while her father praised the absent leader. He himself suddenly perceived a new possibility.

"Maggie, ever think about teaming up with Larry?" he demanded, with his audacious keenness.

She flushed, and hesitated. He did not wait for her slow-coming reply, but turned to her father.

"Jimmie, did Larry ever use women in his stunts?"

"Never. Whenever we suggested using a skirt, Larry absolutely said there was nothing doing. That's one point where he was all wrong. Nothing helps so much, when the sucker is at all sentimental, as a clever, good-looking woman. And Larry'll come around to it all right. He'll see the sense of it, now that he's older and has had two years to think things over."

Old Jimmie nodded, showing his yellow teeth in a sly grin. "You said something a second ago: Maggie and Larry! They'll make a wonder of a team! I mean that she'll work under him with the rest of us. I've been thinking about it a long while. Mebbe you have n't guessed it, but we've been coaching her for the part, and she's just about ripe. She's got the looks, and we can dress her right for whatever job's on hand. Oh, Larry'll put over some great things with Maggie!"

If Hunt felt that there was anything cynically unpaternal in this father planning for his daughter a career of crime, he gave no sign of it. His attention was just then all on Maggie. He saw her eyes grow yet more bright at these last sentences of her father: bright with the vision of approaching adventure.

"The idea suits you, Maggie?" he asked.

"Sure. It'll be great — for Larry is a wonder!"

Barney Palmer suddenly rose, his face twisted with anger. "I'm all fed up on this Larry, Larry, Larry! Come on, Jimmie. Let's get uptown."

Wise Old Jimmie saw that Barney was near an outburst. "All right, Barney, all right," he said promptly.

"Not much use waiting any longer, anyhow. If Larry comes, we'll fix it with the Duchess to meet him to-morrow."

"Then so-long, Maggie," Barney flung at her, and that swagger ex-jockey, gambler, and clever manipulator of the confidence of people with money, slashed aside the shabby burlap curtains with his wisp of a bamboo walking-stick, and strode out of the room.

"Good-night, daughter," and Old Jimmie crossed and kissed her. She kissed him back — a perfunctory kiss. Maggie had never paused to think the matter out, but for some reason she felt little real affection for her father, though of course she admired his astuteness. Perhaps her unconscious lack of love was due in part to the fact that she had never lived with him. Ever since she remembered he had boarded her out, here and there, as he was now boarding her at the Duchess's — and had only come to visit her at intervals, sometimes intervals that stretched into months.

"Barney is rather sweet on you," remarked Hunt after the two were gone.

"I know he is," conceded Maggie in a matter-of-fact way.

"And he seems jealous of Larry — both regarding you, and regarding the bunch."

"He thinks he can run the bunch just as well as Larry. Barney's clever all right, and has plenty of nerve — but he's not in Larry's class. Not by a million miles!"

Hunt perceived that this daring, world-defying, embryonically beautiful model of his had idealized the home-coming nephew of the Duchess into her especial hero. Hunt said no more, but painted rapidly. Night had fallen outside, and long since he had switched on the electric lights. He seemed not at all finicky in this matter of light; he had no supposedly indispensable north light, and midday or midnight were almost equally apt to find him slashing with brush or scratching with crayon.

Presently the Duchess entered. No word was spoken. The Duchess, noteworthy for her mastery of silence, sank into a chair, a bent and shrunken image, nothing seemingly alive about her but her faintly gleaming, deep-set eyes. Several minutes passed, then Hunt lifted the canvas from the easel and stood it against the wall.

"That's all for to-day, Maggie," he announced, pushing the easel to one side. "Duchess, you and this wild young thing spread the banquet-table while I wash up."

He disappeared into a corner shut off by burlap curtains. From within there issued the sound of splashing water and the sputtering roar of snatches of the Toreador's song in a very big and very bad baritone.

Maggie put out a hand, and kept the Duchess from rising. "Sit still — I'll fix the table."

Silently the Duchess acquiesced. Maggie had never felt any tenderness toward this strange, silent woman with whom she had lived for three years, but it was perhaps an indication of qualities within Maggie, whose existence she herself never even guessed, that she instinctively pushed the old woman aside from tasks which involved any physical effort. Maggie now swung the back of a laundry bench up to form a table-top, and upon it proceeded to spread a cloth and arrange a medley of chipped dishes. As she moved swiftly and deftly about, the Duchess watching her with immobile features, these two made a strangely contrasting pair: one seemingly spent and at life's grayest end, the other electric with vitality and giving off the essence of life's unknown adventures.

Hunt stepped out between the curtains, pulling on his coat. "You'll find that chow in my fireless cooker will beat the Ritz," he boasted. "The tenderest, fattest kind of a fatted calf for the returned prodigal."

Maggie started. "The prodigal! You mean — Larry is coming?"

"Sure," grinned Hunt. "That's why we celebrate."

Maggie wheeled upon the Duchess. "Is Larry really coming?"

"Yes," said the old woman.

"But—but why the uncertainty about when he was coming back? Father and Barney thought he was due to get out yesterday."

"Just a mistake we all made about his release. His time was up this afternoon."

"But you told Barney and my father you had n't heard from him."

"I had heard," said the Duchess in her flat tone. "If they want to see him they can see him to-morrow."

"When — when will he be here?"

"Any minute," said the Duchess.

Without a word Maggie whirled about and the next moment she was in her room on the floor below. She did not know what prompted her, but she had a frantic desire to get out of this plain shirt-waist and skirt and into something that would be striking. She considered her scanty wardrobe; her father had recently spoken of handsome gowns and furnishings, but as yet these existed only in his words, and the pseudo-evening gowns which she had worn to restaurant dances with Barney she knew to be cheap and uneffective.

Suddenly she remembered the things Hunt had given her, or had loaned her, the evening four months earlier when he had taken her to an artists' masquerade ball — though to her it had been a bitter disappointment when Hunt had carried her away before the unmasking at twelve o'clock. She tore off the offending waist and skirt, pulled from beneath the bed the pasteboard box containing her costume; and in five minutes of flying hands the transformation was completed. Her thick hair of burnished black was piled on top of her head in gracious disorder, and from it swayed a scarlet paper flower. About her lithe body, over a black satin skirt, swathing her in its graceful folds, clung a Spanish shawl of saffron-colored background with long brown silken fringe, and flowered all over with brown and red and peacock blue, and held in place by three huge barbaric pins jeweled with colored glass, one at either hip and upon her right shoulder, leaving her smooth shoulders bare and free. With no more than a glance to get the hasty effect, she hurried up to the studio.

Hunt whistled at sight of her, but made no remark. Flushed, she looked back at him defiantly. The Duchess gave no sign whatever of being aware of the transformation.

Maggie with excited touches tried to improve her setting of the table, aquiver with expectancy and suspense at the nearness of the meeting — every nerve of audition strained to catch the first footfall upon the stairs. Hunt, watching her, could but wonder, in case Larry was the clever, dashing person that had been described, what would be the outcome when these two natures met and perhaps joined forces.

CHAPTER IV

While the preparations for dinner were going on in the studio, down below Larry turned a corner and swung up the narrow street toward the pawnshop. He halted and peered in before entering; in doing this he was obeying the caution that was his by instinct and training.

Leaning over the counter within and chatting with his grandmother's assistant was Casey, one of the two plain-clothesmen who had arrested him. Larry drew back. He was not afraid of Casey, or of Gavegan, Casey's partner, or of the whole police force, or of the State of New York; they had nothing on him, he had settled accounts by having done his bit. All the same, he preferred not to meet Casey just then. So he went down the street, crossed the cobbled plaza along the water-front, and slipped through the darkness among the trucks out to the end of the pier. Under his feet the East River splashed sluggishly against the piles, but out near the river's center he could see the tide swirling out to sea at six miles an hour, toward the great shadowy Manhattan Bridge crested with its splendid tiara of lights.

He stretched himself and breathed deeply of the warm free spring. It tasted good after two long years of the prison's sealed air. He would have liked to shed his clothing and dive down for a brisk fight with the tingling water. Larry had always taken pleasure in keeping his body fit. He had not cared for the gymnasiums of the ward clubs where he would have been welcome; in them, there had been too much rough horseplay and foulness of mouth, and such had always been offensive to him. And though he had ever looked the gentleman, he had known that the New York Athletic Club and other similar clubs were not for him; they pried a bit too much into a candidate's social and professional standing. So he had turned to a club where really searching inquiries were rarely made; for years he had belonged to a branch of the Y.M.C.A. located just off Broadway, and had played handball and boxed with chunky, slow-footed city detectives who were struggling to retain some physical activity, and with fat playwrights, and with Jewish theatrical managers, and with the few authentic Christians who occasionally strayed into the place and seemed ill at ease therein. He had liked this club for another reason; his sense of humor had often been highly excited by the thought of his being a member of the Y.M.C.A.

Having this instinct for physical fitness, he had not greatly minded being a coal-passer during the greater part of his stay at Sing Sing; better that than working in the knitting mills; so that now, though underfed and under weight, he was active and hard-muscled.

Larry Brainard could not have told why, and just when, he had turned to devious ways. He had never put that part of his life under the microscope. But the simple facts were that he had become an orphan at fifteen and a broker's clerk at nineteen after a course in a business college; and that experiences with wash-sales and such devious and dubious practices of brokers, his high spirits, his instinct for pleasure, his desire for big winnings — these had swept him into a wild crowd before he had been old enough to take himself seriously, and had started him upon a brilliant career of adventures and unlawful money-making in whose excitement there had been no let-up until his arrest. He had never thought about such technical and highly academic subjects as right and wrong up to the day when Casey and Gavegan had slipped the handcuffs upon him. To laugh, to dance, to plan and direct clever coups, to spend the proceeds gayly and lavishly — to challenge the police with another daring coup: that had been life to him, a game that was all excitement.

And now, after two years in which there had been plenty of time for thinking, his conscience still did not trouble him on the score of his offenses. He believed, and was largely right in this belief, that the suckers he had trimmed had all been out to secure unlawful gain and to take cunning advantage of his supposedly foolish self and of other dupes. He had been too clever for them, that was all; in desire and intent they had been as great cheats as himself. So he felt no remorse over his victims; and as for anything he may have done against that impersonal entity, the criminal statutes, why, the period in prison had squared all such matters. So he now faced life pleasantly and with care-free soul.

Larry had turned away from the dark river and had started to retrace his way, when he saw a man approaching through the darkness. Larry paused. The man drew near and halted exactly in front of Larry. By the swing of his body Larry had recognized the man, and his own figure instinctively grew tense.

"What you doin' out here, Brainard?" The voice was peremptory and rough.

"Throwing kisses over at Brooklyn," Larry replied coolly. "And what are you doing out here, Gavegan?"

"Following you. I wanted a quiet word with you. I've been right behind you ever since you hit New York."

"I knew you would be. You and Casey. But you have n't got anything on me."

"I got plenty on you before! — with Casey helping," retorted Gavegan. "And I'll get plenty on you again! — now that I know you are the main guy of a clever outfit. You'll be starting some smooth game — but I'm going to be right after you every minute. And I'll get you. That's the news I wanted to slip you."

"So!" commented Larry drawlingly. "Casey's a fairly decent guy, considering his line — but, Gavegan, I don't see how Casey stands you as a partner. And, Gavegan, I don't see why the Board of Health lets you stay around the streets — when putrefying matter causes so much disease."

"None of your lip, young feller!" growled Gavegan. He stepped closer, bulking over Larry. "You think you are such a damned smart talker and such a damned clever schemer — but I'll bet I'll have you locked up in six months."

Anger boiled up within Larry. Against all the persons connected with his arrest, trial, and imprisonment, he had no particular resentment, except against this one man. He never could forget the time he and Gavegan, he handcuffed, had been locked in a sound-proof cell, and

Gavegan had given him the third degree — in this case a length of heavy rubber hose, applied with a powerful arm upon head and shoulders — in an effort to make him squeal upon his confederates. And that third degree was merely a sample of the material of which Gavegan was made.

Larry held his desire in leash. "So you bet you'll get me. I'll take that bet — any figure you like. I've already got a new game cooked up, Gavegan. Cleverer than anything I've ever tried before."

"Oh, I'll get you!" Gavegan growled again.

"Oh, no, you won't!" And then Larry's old anger against Gavegan got into his tongue and made it wag tauntingly. "You did n't get me the last time; that was a slip and police stools got me. All by yourself, Gavegan, you could n't get anything. Your brain's got flat tires, and its motor does n't fire, and its clutch is broken. The only thing about it that still works is the horn. You've got a hell of a horn, Gavegan, and it never stops blowing."

A tug was nearing the dock, and by its light Larry saw the terrific swing that the enraged detective started. Larry swayed slightly aside, and as Gavegan lunged by, Larry's right fist drove into Gavegan's chin — drove with all the power of his dislike and all the strength of five years in a Y.M.C.A. gymnasium and a year in a prison boiler-room.

Gavegan went down and out.

Larry gazed a moment at the dim, sprawling figure, then turned and made his way off the pier and again to the door of the pawnshop. Casey was gone; he could see no one within but Old Isaac, the assistant.

Larry opened the door and entered. "Hello, Isaac. Where's grandmother?"

It is not a desirable trait in one connected with a pawnshop, that is also reputed to be a fence, to show surprise or curiosity. So Isaac's reply was confined to a few facts and brief direction.

Wondering, Larry mounted the stairway which opened from the confidential business room behind the pawnshop. It was common enough for his grandmother to rent out the third floor; but to a painter, and a crazy painter — that seemed strange. And yet more strange was it for her to be having dinner with the painter.

Larry knocked at the door. A big male voice within gave order:

"Be parlor-maid, Maggie, and see who's there."

The door opened and Larry half entered. Then he stopped, and in surprise gazed at the flushed, gleaming Maggie, slender and supple in the folds of the Spanish shawl.

"Why, Maggie!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand.

"Larry!"

She was thrillingly confused by his surprised admiration. For a moment they stood gazing at each other, holding hands. The clothes given him on leaving prison were of course atrocious, but in all else he measured up to her dreams: lithe, well-built, handsome, a laugh ready on his lips, and the very devil of daring in his smiling, gray-blue eyes.

"How you have grown up, Maggie!" he said, still amazed.

"That's all I've had to do for two years," she returned.

"Come on in, Larry," said the Duchess.

Larry shut the door, bowed with light grace as he had to pass in front of Maggie, and crossed to the Duchess.

"Hello, grandmother," he said as though he had last seen her the day before. He held out his hand, the left one, and she took it in a mummified claw. In all his life he had never kissed his grandmother, nor did he remember ever having been kissed by her.

"Glad you're back, Larry." She dropped his hand. "The man's name is Hunt."

Larry turned to the painter. His laughing eyes could be sharp; they were penetratingly sharp now. And so were Hunt's eyes.

Larry held out his hand, again the left. "And so you're the painter?"

"They call me a painter," responded Hunt, "but none of them believe I'm a painter."

Larry turned again to Maggie. "And so you're actually Maggie! Meaning no offense" — and there was a smiling audacity in his face that it would have been hard to have taken offense at — "I don't see how Old Jimmie Carlisle's daughter got such looks without stealing them."

"Well, then," retorted Maggie, "I don't see how you got your looks unless — "

She broke off and bit her tongue. She had been about to retort with the contrast between Larry's face and his shriveled, hook-nosed grandmother's. They all perceived her intention, however.

Larry came instantly to her rescue with almost imperceptible ease.

"Dinner!" he exclaimed, gazing at the miscellany of dishes on the table. "Am I invited?"

"Invited?" said Hunt. "You're the guest of honor."

"Then might the guest of honor beg the privilege of cleaning up a bit?" Larry drew his right hand from his coat pocket, where it had been all this while, and started to unwind the handkerchief which he had wound about his knuckles as he had crossed from the pier.

"Is your hand hurt much?" Maggie inquired eagerly.

"Just skinned my knuckles."

"How?"

"They happened to connect with a flatfoot's jaw while he was trying to make hypnotic passes at me. He's coming to about now. Officer Gavegan."

"Gavegan!" exclaimed Hunt. "You picked a tough bird. Young man, you're off to a grand start — a charge of assault on an officer the very day they turn you out of jail."

Larry smiled. "Gavegan is a dirty one, but he'll make no charge of assault. He claims to be heavyweight champion boxer of the Police Department. Put a fine crimp in his reputation, would n't it, if he admitted in public that he'd been knocked out by a fellow, bare-handed, supposed to be weak from prison life, forty pounds lighter. He'd get the grand razoo all along the line. Oh, Gavegan will never let out a peep."

"He'll square things in some other way," said Hunt.

"I suppose he'll try," Larry responded carelessly. "Where's the first-aid room?"

Hunt showed him through the curtains. When he came out, Hunt, Maggie, and the Duchess were all engaged in getting the dinner upon the table. Additional help would only be interference, so Larry's eyes wandered casually to the canvases standing in the shadows against the walls.

"Mr. Hunt," he remarked, "you seem to have earned a very real reputation of its sort in the neighborhood. Old Isaac downstairs told me you were crazy — said they called you 'Nuts' — said you were the worst painter that ever happened."

"Yeh, that's what they say," agreed Hunt.

"They certainly are awful, Larry," put in Maggie, coming to his side. "Father thinks they are jokes, and father certainly knows pictures. Just look at a few of them."

"Yeh, look at 'em and have a good laugh," invited Hunt.

Larry carried the portrait of the Duchess to beneath the swinging electric bulb and examined it closely. Maggie, at his shoulder, waited for his mirth; and Hunt regarded him with a sidelong gaze. But Larry did not laugh. He silently returned the picture, and then examined the portrait of Old Jimmie — then of Maggie — then of the Italian madonna, throned on her curbstone. He replaced this last and crossed swiftly to Hunt. Maggie watched this move in amazement.

Larry faced the big painter. His figure was tense, his features hard with suspicion. That moment one could understand why he was sometimes called "Terrible Larry"; just then he looked a devastating explosion that was still unexploded.

"What's your game down here, Hunt?" he demanded harshly.

"My game?" repeated the big painter. "I don't get you."

"Yes, you do! You're down here posing as a boob who smears up canvases!"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Only this: those are not crazy daubs. They're real pictures!"

"Eh!" exclaimed Hunt. Maggie stared in bewilderment at the two men.

Hunt spoke again. "What the dickens do you know about pictures? Old Jimmie, who's said to be a shark, thinks all these things are just comics."

"Jimmie only thinks a picture's good after a thousand press-agents have said it's good," Larry returned. "I studied at the Academy of Design for two years, till I learned I could never paint. But I know pictures."

"And you think mine are good?"

"Not in the popular manner — they're too original. But they're great. And you're a great painter. And I want to know —"

"Hurray!" shouted Hunt, and flung an enthusiastic arm about Larry, and began to pound his back. "Oh, boy! Oh, boy!"

Larry wrenched himself free. "Cut that out. Then you admit you're a great painter?"

"Of course I'm a great painter!" shouted Hunt. "Who should know it better than I do?"

"Then what's a great painter doing down here? What's the game you're trying to put over, posing as —"

"Listen, son," Hunt grinned. "You've called me and I've got to show my cards. Only you must n't ever tell — nor must Maggie; the Duchess does n't talk, anyway. No need bothering you just now with a lot of details about myself. It's enough to say that people would n't pay me except when I did the usual pretty rot; no one believed in the other stuff I wanted to do. I wanted to get away from that bunch; I wanted to do real studies of human people, with their real nature showing through. So I beat it. Understand so far?"

"But why pose as a dub down here?"

"I never started the yarn that I was a dub. The people who looked at my work, and laughed, started that talk. I did n't shout out that I was a great artist for the mighty good reason that if I had, and had been believed, the people who posed for me either would n't have done it or would have been so self-conscious that they would have tried to look like some one else, and would never have shown me themselves at all. Thinking me a joke, they just acted natural. Which, young man, is about all you need to know."

Maggie looked on breathlessly at the two men, bewildered by this new light in which Hunt was presented, and fascinated by the tense alertness of her hero, Larry.

Slowly Larry's tensity dissipated. "I don't know about the rest of your make-up," he said slowly, "but as a painter you're a whale."

"The rest of him's all right, too," put in the dry, unemotional voice of the Duchess. "Dinner's ready. Come on."

As they moved to the table Hunt clapped a big hand on Larry's shoulder. "And to think," he chuckled, "it took a crook fresh from Sing Sing to discover me as a great artist! You're clever, Larry — clever! Maggie, get the corkscrew into action and fill the glasses with the choicest vintage of H_2O. A toast. Here's to Larry!"

CHAPTER V

THE dinner was simple: beef stewed with potatoes and carrots and onions, and pie, and real coffee. But it measured up to Hunt's boast: the chef of the Ritz, limited to so simple a menu, could indeed have done no better. And Larry, after his prison fare, was dining as dine the gods.

The irrepressible Hunt, trying to read this new specimen that had come under his observation, sought to draw Larry out. "Barney Palmer and Old Jimmie were here this afternoon, wanting to see you. They've got something big waiting for you. I suppose you're all ready to jump in and put it over with a wallop."

"I'm going to put something over with a wallop — but I guess business will have to wait until Barney, Jimmie, and I have a talk. Can you spare me a little more of that stew?"

His manner of speaking was a quiet announcement to Hunt that his plans were for the present a closed subject. Hunt felt balked, for this lean, alert, much-talked-of adventurer piqued him greatly; but he switched to other subjects, and during the rest of the meal did most of the talking. The Duchess was silent, and seemingly was concerned only with her food. Larry got in a fair portion of speech, but for the most part his attention, except for that required for eating, was fixed upon Maggie.

How she had sprung up since he had last seen her! Almost a woman now — and destined to be a beauty! And more than just a beauty: she was colorful, vital, high-strung. Before he had gone away he had regarded her with something akin to the negligent affection of an older brother. But this thing which was already beginning to surge up in him was altogether different, and he knew it.

As for Maggie, when she looked at him, she flushed and her eyes grew bright. Larry was back! — the brilliant, daring Larry. She was aware that she had been successful in startling and gripping his attention. Yes, they would do great things together!

When the dinner was finished and the dishes washed, Larry gave voice to this new urge that had so quickly grown up within him.

"What do you say, Maggie, to a little walk?"

"All right," she replied eagerly.

They went down the narrow stairway together. On the landing of the second floor, which contained only Maggie's bedroom and the Duchess's and a tiny kitchen, Maggie started to leave him to change into street clothes; but he caught her arm and said, "Come on." They descended the next flight and came into the back room behind the pawnshop, which the Duchess used as a combination of sitting-room, office, and storeroom. About this musty museum hung or stood unredeemed seamen's jackets, men and women's evening wear, banjos, guitars, violins, umbrellas, and one huge green stuffed parrot sitting on top of the Duchess's safe.

"I wanted to talk, not walk," he said. "Let's stay here."

He took her hands and looked down on her steadily. Under the yellow gaslight her face gleamed excitedly up into his, her breath came quickly.

"Well, sir, what do you think of me?" she demanded. "Have I changed much?"

"Changed? Why, it's magic, Maggie! I left you a schoolgirl; you're a woman now. And a wonder!"

"You think so?" She flushed with pride and pleasure, and a wildness of spirit possessed her and demanded expression in action. She freed her left hand and slipped it over Larry's shoulder. "Come on — let's two-step."

"But, Maggie, I've forgotten."

"Come on!"

Instantly she was dragging him over the scanty floor space. But after a moment he halted, protesting.

"These prison brogans were not intended by their builders for such work. If you've got to dance, you'll have to work it out of your system alone."

"All right!"

At once, in the midst of the dingy room, humming the music, she was doing Carmen's dance — wild, provocative, alluring. It was not a remarkable performance in any professionally technical sense; but it had vivid personality; she was light, lithe, graceful, flashing with color and spirits.

"Maggie!" he exclaimed, when she had finished and stood before him glowing and panting. "Good! Where did you learn that?"

"In the chorus of a cabaret revue."

"Is that what you're doing now, working in a chorus?"

"No. Barney and father said a chorus was no place for me." She drew nearer. "Oh, Larry, I've such a lot to tell you."

"Go on."

"Well" — she cocked her head impishly — "I've been going to school."

"Going to school! Where?"

"Lots of places. Just now I'm going to school at the Ritzmore Hotel."

"At the Ritzmore Hotel!" He stared at her bewildered. "What are you learning there?"

"To be a lady." She laughed at his increasing bewilderment. "A real lady, Larry," she went on excitedly. "Oh, it's such a wonderful idea! Father had never seemed to think much of me till the night I went to a masquerade ball with Mr. Hunt, and he and Barney saw me in these clothes. They had never seen me really dressed up before; Barney said it was an eye-opener. They saw how I could be of big use to you all. But to be that, I've got to be a lady — a real lady, who knows how to behave and wear real clothes. That's what they're doing now: making me a lady."

"Making you a lady!" exclaimed Larry. "How?"

"By putting me where I can watch real ladies, and study them. Barney cut short my being in a chorus; Barney said a chorus girl never learned to pass for a lady. So I've been working in places where the swellest women come. First in a milliner shop; then as dresser to a model in the shop of a swell modiste; always watching how the ladies behave. Now I'm at the Ritzmore, and I carry a tray of cigarettes around the tables at lunch and at tea-time and during dinner and during the after-theater supper. I'm supposed to be there to sell cigarettes, but I'm really there to watch how the ladies handle their knives and forks and behave toward the men. Is n't it all awfully clever?"

"Why, Maggie!" he exclaimed.

"And pretty soon, when I've learned more," she continued rapidly, "I'm going to have swell clothes of my own — and be a lady — and get away from this dingy, stuffy, dead old place! I can't stand for being buried down here much longer. And, oh, Larry, I'm going to begin to work with you!"

"What?" he blinked, not yet quite understanding.

"You think I'm not clever enough? But I am!" she protested. "I tell you I've learned a lot. And Barney and father have let me help in a lot of things — nothing really big yet, of course. They think I'm going to be a wonder. Just to-day father was saying that you and I, teamed up — Why, what's the matter, Larry?"

"You and I — teamed up," he repeated slowly.

"Yes. Don't you like the idea?"

His hands suddenly gripped her bare shoulders.

"There's nothing to it!" he exclaimed almost savagely.

"What's that?" she cried, startled.

"I tell you there's nothing to it!"

"You — you think I can't put it over?"

"You can't! And I'm not going to have it!"

"Why — why —"

Staring, she drew slowly away from him. His face, which a few moments before had been smiling, was now harsh and dominant with decision. She had heard him spoken of as "Laughing Larry"; and also as "Terrible Larry" whose aroused will none could brook. He looked this latter person now, and she could not understand.

But though she could not understand, her own defiant spirit stormed up to fight this unexpected opposition. He did n't believe in her — that was it! He did n't think she was equal to working with him! Her young figure stiffened in angered pride, and her mind was gathering hot phrases to fling at him when the door from the pawnshop began to creak open. Instantly Larry turned toward it, relaxed and yet alert for anything. Old Jimmie and Barney Palmer entered.

"Hello, Larry!" cried the old man, crossing. "Welcome to our city!"

"Hello, Jimmie. Hello, Barney." And Larry shook hands with his partners of other days.

"Gee, Larry, it's good to see you!" exclaimed the cunning-eyed old man. "Did n't know you were back till I bumped into Gavegan on Broadway. He told me, and so Barney and I beat it over here to see you. Believe me, Larry, that flatfoot is certainly sore at you!"

Larry ignored the last sentence. "Think it exactly wise for you two to come here?"

"Why, Larry?"

"Gavegan, Casey, the police, may follow, thinking you've come to see me for some purpose. That outfit may act upon suspicion."

Jimmie grinned cunningly. "A man can come to visit his own daughter as often as he likes. Father love, Larry."

"I see; that'll be your explanation." Larry's eyes grew keen at the new understanding. "I had n't thought of that before, Jimmie. So that's why you've always boarded Maggie around in shady joints: so's you could meet your pals and yet always have the excuse that you had come to meet your daughter?"

"Partly that," smiled Old Jimmie blandly — perhaps too blandly. "Suppose we sit down."

They did so, Maggie sitting a little apart from the men and regarding Larry with indignant, questioning eyes. She still could not understand his queer behavior when she had announced her intention of working with him. Could it be, as her father had said, because he would never work with women — not trusting them? She'd show him!

She was so occupied with this wonderment that she gave no heed to the talk about Larry's experience in Sing Sing and Old Jimmie's recital of what had happened among Larry's friends during his absence. During this gossip the Duchess entered from the stairway, and without word to any one shuffled across to her desk in a corner and bent silently over her accounts: just one more grotesque and unredeemed pledge in this museum of antiquities and forgotten pawns.

Presently Barney Palmer, who had been impatient during all this, broke out with:

"Aw, let's cut out this chatter about what used to be and get down to cases. Jimmie, will you spill the business to Larry, or want me to?"

"I'll tell him. Listen, Larry." Maggie pricked up her ears; the talk was now excitingly important. "We've got our very greatest game all planned out. Stock-selling game; going to unload the whole thing on one sucker, and we've got the sucker picked out. Besides you and Barney and me, there's Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt in it — a classy bunch all right. And we think that for the woman end we'll take in Mae Gorham. She's clever and innocent-eyed —"

"But I thought you were going to take me in!" protested Maggie.

"Maggie'll be just as good as Mae Gorham," put in Barney.

"We'll let that pass," said Old Jimmie. "The main thing, Larry, is that everything is ready. It's a whale of a business proposition. We've been waiting for you; you're all that's lacking — the brainy guy to sit behind the scenes and manage the thing. You've handled the bunch for a long time, and they want you to handle this. For you're sure a wonder at business; Larry! None keener. Well, we've held this off waiting for you for a month. How about jumping right in?"

All three eyed Larry. His lean face was expressionless. He lit a cigarette, rose and leaned against the Duchess's safe on which stood the green parrot, and, gaze on the floor, slowly exhaled smoke through his nostrils.

"Well?" demanded Barney.

Larry looked at the two men with quiet, even eyes. "Thanks to both of you. It's a great compliment. But I've had time to do a little planning myself up in Sing Sing, and I've worked out a game that's got this one beat a mile."

"Hell!" ejaculated Barney in wrathful disgust. "Jimmie, I told you we were wasting time waiting for him!"

"Hold on a second, Barney. If Larry's worked out a better game, he'll take us into it. But, Larry, how can your game beat this one?"

"Because there's more money in it. And because it's safer."

"Safe! Aw, hell!" The smouldering jealousy and hatred glared out of Barney's greenish eyes. "I always knew you had a yellow streak! Something safe! Aw, hell!"

"Don't blow up, Barney. What is the new game, Larry?" queried the old man.

Larry regarded the two men steadfastly. He seemed reluctant to speak.

"Well?" prompted Old Jimmie. "Is it something you don't want to let us in on?"

"Of course I'll let you in on it, and be glad to, if you want to come in," Larry replied in his level tone. "As I said, I've thought it all out and it's a great proposition. Here's the game: I'm going to run straight."

For a moment all three sat astounded by this quiet statement from their leader. Nothing he might have said could have been more unexpected, more stupefying. The Duchess alone moved; she turned her head and held her sunken eyes upon her grandson.

Simultaneously the two men and Maggie stood up.

"The hell you say!" grated Barney Palmer.

"Larry, you gone crazy?" cried Old Jimmie.

Maggie moved a pace nearer him. "Going to go straight?" she asked incredulously.

"Listen, all of you," Larry said quietly. "No, Jimmie, I've not gone crazy. I'm merely going a little sane. You just said I was a wonder at business, Jimmie. I think I am myself. I thought it all over as a business proposition. Suppose we clean up fifty or a hundred thousand on a big deal. We've got to split it several ways, perhaps pay a big piece to the police for protection, perhaps pay a lot of lawyers, and then perhaps get sent away for a year or several years, during which we don't take in a nickel. I figured that over a term of years my average income was mighty small. As a business man it seemed to me that I was in a poor business, with no future. So I decided to get into a new business that had a future. That's the size of it."

"You're turning yellow — that's the real size of it!" snarled Barney Palmer, half starting toward him.

"Better be a little careful, Barney," Larry warned with tightening jaw.

"You really mean, Larry," demanded Old Jimmie, "that you're going to drop us after us counting on you and waiting for you so long?"

"I'm sorry about having kept you waiting, Jimmie. But we've parted definitely." Then Larry added: "Unless you want to travel my road."

"Your road! Never!" snapped Barney.

"And you, Jimmie?" Larry inquired, his eyes on Barney's inflamed face.

"I don't see your proposition. And I'm too old a bird to start something new. No, thanks. I'll stick to what I know."

His next words, showing his long yellow teeth, were spoken slowly, but they were hard, and had a cutting edge. "You've got a sweet idea of what's straight, Larry: dropping us without a leader, just when we need a leader most."

Larry's composed yet watchful gaze was still on Barney. "You're not really left in such a bad way. Barney here is ready to take charge."

"You bet I am!" Barney flamed at him, his hands clenching. "And the bunch won't lose by the change, you bet! The bunch always thought you were an ace — and I always knew you were a two-spot. And now they'll see I was right — that you were always yellow!"

Larry still leaned against the safe in the same posture of seeming ease, but he expected Barney to strike at any moment, and held himself in readiness for a flashing fist. Barney had been hard to hold in leash in the old days; now that all ties of partnership were broken, he saw in those small gleaming eyes a defiance and a hatred that henceforth had no reason for restraint. And he knew that Barney was shrewd, grimly tenacious, and limitless in self-confidence and ambition.

"And listen to this, too, Larry Brainard," Barney's temper carried him on. "Don't you mix in and try any preaching on Maggie." He half turned his head jealously. "Maggie, don't you listen to any of this boob's Salvation Army talk!"

Maggie did not at once respond, but stood gazing at the two confronting figures. To her they were an oddly dissimilar pair: Barney in the smartest clothes that an over-smart Broadway tailor could create, and Larry in the shapeless garments that were the State's gift to him on leaving prison.

"Maggie," he repeated, "don't you listen to this boob's talk!"

"I'll do just as I please, Barney."

"But you're going to come our way?" he demanded.

"Of course."

He turned back to Larry. "You hear that? You leave Maggie alone!"

Larry did not answer, though his temper was rising. He looked over Barney's head at Maggie's father.

"Jimmie," he remarked in his same even voice, "anything more you'd like to say?"

"I'm through."

"Then," said Larry, "better lead your new commander-in-chief out of here, or I'll carry him out and spank him."

"What's that?" snarled Barney.

"Get out!" Larry ordered, in a voice suddenly like steel.

Barney's fist swung viciously at Larry's head. It did not land, because Larry's head was elsewhere. Larry did not take advantage of the opening to strike back, but as the fist flashed by he seized the wrist, and in the same instant he seized the other wrist. The next moment he held Barney helpless in a twisting, torturing grip that he had learned from one of his non-Christian friends at the Y.M.C.A.

"Barney — are you going to walk out, or shall I kick you out?"

Barney's answer came after a moment through gritted teeth: "I'll walk out — but I'll get you for this!"

"I know you'll try, Barney. And I know you'll try to get me behind my back." Larry loosed his grip. "Good-night."

Barney backed glowering to the door; and Old Jimmie, his gray face an expressionless mask, silently followed him out.

All this while the Duchess had looked on, motionless in her corner, a dingy, forgotten part of the dingy background — no more noticeable than one of her own dusty, bizarre pledges.

CHAPTER VI

For a moment after the door had closed upon Barney and Old Jimmie, Larry stood gazing at it. Then he turned to Maggie.

She was standing slenderly upright. Her head was imperiously high, her black eyes defiant. Neither spoke at once. More than before was he impressed by her present and her potential beauty. Till this night he had thought of her only casually, as merely a young girl; he was not now consciously in love with her — her young womanhood had burst upon him too suddenly for such a consciousness — but a warm tingling went through him as he gazed at her imperious, self-confident youth. Part of his mind was thinking much the same thought that Hunt had considered a few hours earlier: here were the makings of a magnificent adventuress.

"Maggie," he mused, "you did n't get your looks from your father. You must have had a fine-looking mother."

"I don't know — I never saw her," she returned shortly.

"Poor kid," Larry mused on — "and with only Old Jimmie for a father." She did not know what to say. For a long time she had dreamed of this man as her hero; she had dreamed of splendid adventures with him in which she should win his praise. And now — and now —

He switched to another subject.

"So you have decided to string along with your father and Barney?"

"I have."

"Don't you do it, Maggie."

"Don't you preach, Larry."

"I'm not preaching. I'm just talking business to you. The same as I talked business to myself. The crooked game is a poor business for a woman who can do something else — and you can do something else. I've known a lot of women in the crooked game. They've all had a rotten finish, or are headed for one. So forget it, Maggie. There's more in the straight game."

She had swiftly come to feel herself stronger and wiser than her ex-hero. In her tremendous pride and confidence of eighteen, she regarded him almost with pitying condescension.

"Something's softened your brain, Larry. I know better. The people who pretend to go straight are just fakes; they're playing a different kind of a smooth game, that's all. Everybody is out to get his, and get it the easiest and quickest way he can. You know that's so. And that's just what I am going to do."

Larry had once talked much the same way, but it seemed puzzlingly strange just now to hear such talk from a young girl. Then he understood.

"You could n't help having such ideas, Maggie, living among crooks ever since you were a kid. Why, Old Jimmie could not have used better methods, or got better results, if he had set out consciously to make you a crook." Then a sudden possibility came to him. "D' you suppose he could always have had that plan — to make you into a crook?" he asked.

"What difference does that make?" she demanded shortly.

"A funny thing for a father to do with his own child," Larry returned. "But whether Jimmie intended it or not, that's just what he's done."

"What I am, I am," she retorted with her imperious defiance. Just then she felt that she hated him; she quivered with a desire to hurt him: he had so utterly destroyed her romantic hero and her romantic dreams. Her hands clenched.

"You talk about going straight — it's all rot!" she flamed at him. "A lot of men say they're going straight, but no one ever does! And you won't either!"

"You think I won't?"

"I know you won't! You don't know how to do any regular work. And, besides, no one will give a crook a chance."

She had unerringly placed her finger upon his two great problems, and Larry knew it; he had considered them often enough.

"All the same, I'm going to make good!" he declared.

"Oh, no, you're not!"

Perhaps he was stirred chiefly by the sting of her taunting tongue, by the blaze of her dark, disdainful eyes;

and perhaps by the changed feeling toward this creature whom he had left a half-grown girl and returned to find a woman. At any rate, he crossed and seized her wrists and gazed fiercely down upon her.

"I tell you, I'm going to go straight, and I'm going to make a success of it! You'll see!" And then he added dominantly: "What's more, I'm going to make you go straight, too!"

She made no attempt to free herself, but blazed up at him defiantly. "You'll make me do nothing. I'm going to be just what I said, and I'm going to make a success of it. Just wait — I'll prove to you what I can do! And you — you'll be a failure, and will come slinking back and beg us to take you in!"

They glared at each other silently, angrily, their aroused wills defying each other. For a moment they stood so. Then something — a mixture of his desire to dominate this defiant young thing and of that growing change in him toward her — surged madly into Larry's head. He caught Maggie in his arms and kissed her.

All the rigidity went suddenly from her figure and she hung loose in his embrace. Their gazes held for a moment. She went pale, and quivering all through she looked up at him in startled, wide-eyed silence. As for Larry, a dizzying, throbbing emotion permeated his whole astonished being.

Suddenly she pushed herself free from his relaxing arms, and backed away from him.

"What did you do that for?" she whispered huskily.

But she did not wait for his answer. She turned and hurried for the stairway. Three steps up she turned again and gazed down upon him. Her cheeks were once more flushed and her dark eyes blazing.

"It's going to be just as I said!" she flung at him. "I'm going to succeed — you're going to fail! You just wait and see!"

She turned and ran swiftly up the stairway and out of sight. Neither of them had been aware that the Duchess, a drab figure merged into a drab background, had regarded them fixedly during all this scene. And Larry was still unconscious that the old eyes were now watching him with their deep-set, expressionless fixity.

Motionless, Larry stood gazing at where Maggie had been. Within him was tumult; he did not yet understand the significance of that impulsive kiss... He began to walk the floor, his mind and will now more in control. Yes, he was going to go straight; he was going to make good, and make good in a big way! And he was going to make Maggie go straight, too. He'd show her! It was n't going to be easy, but he had his big plan made, and he had determination, and he knew he'd win in the end. Yes, he'd show her!...

Up before the mirror Maggie sat looking intently at herself. Part of her consciousness was wondering about that kiss, and part kept fiercely repeating that she'd show him — she'd show him — she'd show him!...

Looking thus into their futures they were both very certain of themselves and of the roads which they were to travel.

CHAPTER VII

LARRY was still gazing at where Maggie had stood, flashing her defiance at him, when Hunt came thumping down the stairway.

"Hello, young fellow; what you been doing to Maggie?" demanded the painter.

"Why?"

"Her door was open when I came by and I called to her. She did n't answer, but, oh, what a look! What's in the air?"

And then Hunt noted the Duchess apart in her corner.

"I say, Duchess — what were Larry and Maggie rowing about?"

"Grandmother!" Larry exclaimed with a start. "I'd forgotten you were here! You must have heard it all — go ahead and tell him."

"Tell him yourself," returned the Duchess.

Larry and Hunt took chairs, and Larry gave the gist of what he had said about his decision to Barney and Old Jimmie and Maggie. The Duchess, still motionless at her desk as she had been all during Larry's scene with Old Jimmie and Barney, and then his scene with Maggie, regarded her grandson with that emotionless, mummified face in which only the red-margined eyes showed life or interest.

"So you're going to go straight, eh?" queried Hunt. The big painter sat with his long legs sprawling in front of him, a black pipe in his mouth, and looked at Larry skeptically. "You certainly did hand a jolt to your friends who'd been counting on you. And yet you're sore because they were sore at you and did n't believe in you."

"Did I say that I was sore?" queried Larry.

"No, but you're acting it. And you're sore at Maggie because she did n't believe that you could make good or that you'd stick it out. Well, I don't believe you will either."

"You're a great painter, Hunt, and a great cook — but I don't give a damn what you believe."

"Keep your shirt on, young fellow," Hunt responded, puffing imperturbably. "I say I believe you won't win out — but that's not saying I don't want you to win out. If that's what you want to do, go to it, and may luck be with you, and may the devil stay in hell. The morals of other people are out of my line — none of my business. I'm a painter, and it's my business to paint people as I find them. But Maggie certainly did put her finger on the tough spot in your proposition: for a crook to find a job and win the confidence of people. It's up grade all the way, and it takes ten men's nerve to stick it out to the top. Yep, Maggie was sure right!"

And then the Duchess broke her accustomed silence with her thin croak:

"Never you mind Maggie! She thinks she knows everything, but she does n't know anything."

Larry looked in surprise at his grandmother. There was a flash in her old eyes; but the next moment the spark was gone.

"Sure you're up against it — but I'll be rooting for you." Hunt was grinning. "But say, young fellow, what made you decide to vote the other ticket?"

Larry was trained at reading faces; and in the rough-hewn, grinning features of Hunt he read good-fellowship. Larry swiftly responded in kind, for from the moment he had pulled the mask of being a fool from the painter and shown him to be a real artist, he had felt drawn toward this impecunious swashbuckler of the arts. So he now repeated the business motives which he had presented to Barney and Old Jimmie. As Larry talked he became more spontaneous, and after a time he was telling of the effect upon him of seeing various shrewd men locked up and unexercised in prison. And presently his reminiscence settled upon one prison acquaintance: a man past middle age, clever in his generation, who had already done some fifteen years of a long sentence. He was, said Larry, grim and he rarely spoke; but a close, wordless friendship had developed between them. Only once, in an unusually relaxed mood, had the old convict spoken of himself, but what he had then said had had a greater part in rousing Larry to his new decision than the words of any other man.

"It was a queer story Joe let out," continued Larry. "Before he was sent away he had a kid, just a baby whose mother was dead. He told me he wanted to have his kid brought up without ever knowing anything about the kind of people he knew and the kind of life he'd lived. He wanted it to grow up among decent people. He had money put away and he had an old friend, a pal, that he'd trust with anything. So he turned over his money and his baby to his friend, and gave orders that the kid was to be brought up decent, sent to school, and that the kid was never to know anything about Joe. Of course the baby was too young then ever to remember him; and when he gets out he's going to keep absolutely clear of the kid's life — he wants his kid to have the best possible chance."

"What is his whole name, and what was he sent up for?" queried the Duchess, that flickering fire of interest once more in her old eyes.

"Joe Ellison. He was an old-time confidence man. He got caught in a jam — there had been drinking — there was some shooting — and he had attempted manslaughter tacked on to the charge of swindling. But Joe said everybody had been drinking and that the shooting was accidental."

"Joe Ellison — I knew him," said the Duchess. "He was about the cleverest man of his day. But I never knew he had a child. Who was this best friend of his?"

"Joe Ellison did n't mention his name," answered Larry. "You see Joe spoke of his story only once. But he then said that he'd had letters once a month telling how fine the kid was getting on — till three or four years ago when he got word that his friend had died. The way things stand now, Joe won't know how to find the kid when he gets out even if he should want to find it — and he would n't know it even if he saw it. Up in Sing Sing when I had nothing else to do," concluded Larry, "I tell you I thought a lot about that situation — for it certainly is *some situation:* Joe Ellison for fifteen years in prison with just one big idea in his life, the idea being the one thing he felt he was really doing or ever could do, his very life built on that one idea: that outside, somewhere, was his kid growing up into a fine young person — never guessing it had such a father — and Joe never intending to see it again and not being able to know it if he ever should see it. I tell you, after learning Joe's story, it made me feel that I'd had enough of the old life."

Again the Duchess spoke. "Did Joe ever mention its name?"

"No, he just spoke of it as 'his kid.'"

Larry was quiet a moment. "You see," he added, "I want to get settled before Joe comes out — his time's up in a few months — so that I can give him some sort of place near me. He's all right, Joe is; but he's too old to have any show at a fresh start if he tries to make it all on his own."

"Larry, you haven't got such a tough piece of old brass for a heart yourself," commented Hunt. "What are your own plans?"

"I know I've got the makings of a real business man — I've already told you that," said Larry confidently. He had thought this out carefully during his days as a coal-passer and his long nights upon the eighteen-inch bunk in his cell. "I've got a lot of the finishing touches; I know the high spots. What I need are the rudiments — the fundamentals — connecting links. You see, I had part of a business college training a long time before I went to work in a broker's office, stenography and typewriting; I've been a secretary in the warden's office the last few months and I've brushed up on the old stuff and I'm pretty good. That ought to land me a job. Then I'm going to study nights. Of course, I'd get on faster if I could have private lessons with one of the head men of one of these real business schools. I'd mop up this stuff about organization and management mighty quick, for that business stuff comes natural to me. A bit of that sort of going to school would connect up and give a working unity to what I already know. But then I'll find a job and work the thing out some way. I'm in this to win out, and win out big!"

Once more the rarely heard voice of the Duchess sounded, and though thin it had a positive quality:

"You're not going to take any job at first. First thing, you're going to give all your time to those private lessons."

Larry gazed at the Duchess, surprised by the tone in which she spoke. "But, grandmother, these lessons cost money. And I did n't have a thin dime left when my lawyers finished with me."

"I've got plenty of money — and it's yours. And the money you get from me will be honest money, too; the interest on loans made in my pawnshop is honest all right. It'll be better, anyhow, for you to be out in the world a few days, getting used to it, before you take a job."

"Why, grandmother!"

The explanation seemed bald and inadequate, but Larry did not know what else to say, he was so taken aback. The Duchess, as far as he had been able to see, had never shown much interest in him. And now, unless he was mistaken, there was something very much like emotion quavering in her thin voice and shining in her old eyes.

"I don't interfere with what people want to do," she continued — "but, Larry, I'm glad you've decided to go straight."

And then the Duchess went on to make the longest speech that any living person had ever heard issue from her lips, and to reveal more than had yet been heard of that unmysterious mystery which lived within her shriveled, misshapen figure:

"That's what made me interested in Joe Ellison's story — his wanting to get his child clear of the life he was living; though I did n't know he had any such ideas till you told me. Larry, I could n't get out of this life myself; I was part of it, I belonged to it. But I felt the same as Joe Ellison, and over forty years ago I got your mother out of it, and your mother never came back to it. I did that much. After she died it made me sick when you, all I've got left, began to go crooked. But I had no control over you; I could n't do anything. So I'm glad that at last you're going to go straight. I'm glad, Larry!"

The emotion that had given her voice a strange and increasing vibrance, was suddenly brought under control or snuffed out; and she added in her usual thin, mechanical tone: "The money will be ready for you in the morning."

Startled and embarrassed by this outbreak of things long hidden beneath the dust in the secret chambers of her being, and wishing to avoid the further embarrassment of thanks, the Duchess turned quickly and awkwardly back to her desk, and her bent old body became fixed above her figures. In a moment the ever-alert Hunt had out the little block of drawing-paper he always carried in a pocket, and with swift, eager strokes he was sketching the outline of that bent, shrunken shape that had subsided so swiftly from emotion to the commonplace.

Larry gazed at the Duchess in silent bewilderment. He had thought he had known his grandmother. He was now realizing that perhaps he did not know his grandmother at all.

CHAPTER VIII

THAT night Larry slept on a cot set up in Hunt's studio. Hunt had made the proposition that Larry consider the studio his headquarters for the present, and Larry had accepted. Of course the cot and the rough-and-ready furnishings of the studio were grotesquely short of the luxury of those sunny days when Larry had had plenty of easy money and had been free to gratify his taste for the best of everything; but the quarters were infinitely more luxurious and comfortable than his more recent three-by-seven room at Sing Sing with its damp and chilly stone walls.

There were many reasons why Larry was appealed to by the idea of making his home for the present in this old house in this dingy, unexciting, unromantic street. He was drawn toward this bluff, outspoken, autocratic painter, and was curious about him. And then the way his grandmother had spoken, the gleam in her old eyes, had stirred an affection for her that he had never before felt. And then there was Maggie, with her startlingly new dusky beauty, her admiration of him that had so swiftly altered to defiance, her challenge to a duel of purposes.

Yes, for the present, this dingy old house in this dingy old street was just the place he preferred to be.

It was not the part of wisdom to start forth on the beginning of his new career in his shapeless prison shoddy; so the next day Larry pottered about the studio, acting as maid-of-all-work, while the clothes in his trunk which had been stored with the Duchess were being sponged and pressed by the little tailor down the street, and while a laundress, driven by the Duchess, was preparing the rest of his outfit for his début. In his capacity of maid, with a basket on his arm, he went out into the little street, where in his shabby clothes he was recognized by none and leaned for a time against the mongrel, underfed tree that was hesitatingly greeting the spring with a few half-hearted leaves. He bathed himself in the warm sun which seemed over-glorious for so mean a street; he filled his lungs with the tangy May air; yes, it was wonderful to be free again!

Then he strolled about the street on his business of marketing. It amused him to be buying three pounds of potatoes and a pound of chopped meat and a package of macaroni, and to be counting Hunt's pennies — remembering those days when he had been a personage to head waiters, and had had his table reserved, and with a careless Midas's gesture had left a dollar, or five, or twenty, for the waiter's tip.

When he climbed back into the studio he watched Hunt slashing about with his paint. Hunt growled and roared at him, and kidded him; and Larry came back at him with the same kind of verbal horseplay, after the fashion of men. Presently a relaxation, if not actual friendship, began to develop in their attitude toward each other.

"Tell you what," Larry remarked, standing with legs wide apart gazing at the picture of the Italian mother throned on the curb nursing her child, "if I were dolled up all proper, I bet I could take some of this stuff out and sell it for real dough."

"Huh, nobody wants that stuff!" snorted Hunt. "It's too good. Sell it! You're off your bean, young fellow!"

"I can sell anything, my bucko," Larry returned evenly. "All I need is a man who has plenty of money and a moderate willingness to listen. I've sold pictures of an oil derrick on a stock certificate, exact value nothing at all, for a masterpiece's price — so I guess I could sell a real picture."

"Aw, you shut up!"

"The real trouble with you," commented Larry, "is that, though you can paint, as a business man, as a promoter of your own stock, the suckling infant in that picture is a J. Pierpont Morgan of multiplied capacity compared to — "

"Stop making that noise like a damned fool!"

This amiable pastime of throwing stones at each other was just then interrupted by the entrance of Maggie for an appointed sitting, before going to her business of carrying a tray of cigarettes about the Ritzmore. She gave Hunt a pleasant "good-morning," the pleasantness purposely stressed in order to make more emphatic her curt nod to Larry and the cold hostility of her eye. During the hour she posed, Larry, moving leisurely about his kitchen duties, addressed her several times, but no remark got a word from her in response. He took his rebuffs smilingly, which irritated her all the more.

"Maggie, I'll get my real clothes late this afternoon; how about my dropping in at the Ritzmore for a cup of tea, and letting me buy some cigarettes and talk to you when you're not busy?" he inquired when Hunt had finished with her.

"You may buy cigarettes, but you'll get no talk!" she snapped, and head high and dark eyes flashing contempt, she swept past him.

Hunt watched her out. As the door slammed behind her, he remarked dryly, his eyes searching Larry keenly:

"Our young queen does n't seem wildly enthusiastic about you or your programme."

"She certainly is not."

"Don't let that worry you, young fellow. That's a common trait of her whole tribe; women simply cannot believe in a man!"

There was an emphasis and a cynicism in this last remark which caused Larry to regard the painter searchingly. "You seem to know what it is. Don't mean to butt in, Hunt, if there are any trespassing signs up — but there's a woman in your case?"

"Of course there is — there's always a woman; that's another reason I'm here," Hunt answered. "She did n't believe in me — did n't believe I could paint — did n't believe in the things I wanted to do — so I just picked up my playthings and walked out of her existence."

"Wife?" queried Larry.

"Thank God, no!" exclaimed Hunt emphatically. "No — 'I thank whatever gods there be, I am the captain of my soul!' Oh, she's all right — altogether too good for me," he added. "Here, try this tobacco."

Larry picked up the pouch flung him and accepted without remark this being abruptly shunted off the track. But he surmised that this woman in the background of Hunt's life meant a great deal more to the painter than Hunt tried to indicate by his attempt to dismiss her casually — and Larry wondered what kind of woman she was, and what the story had been.

The following day, clean-shaven and in his freshened clothes — they were smart and well-tailored, though sober indeed compared with Barney's, and two years behind the style of which Barney's were the extreme expression — Larry passed Maggie on the stairway with a smile, who gave him no smile in return, and started forth upon his quest. He was well-dressed, he had money in his pockets, he had a plan, and the air of freedom of a new life was sweet in his nostrils. He was going to succeed!

It was easy enough, with his mind alert for what he wanted, and with the Duchess's liberal allowance to pay for what he wanted, for Larry to find in this city of ten thousand institutes teaching business methods, the particular article which suited his especial needs. He found this article in an institute whose black-faced headline in its advertisements was, "We Make You a $50,000

Executive"; and the article which he found, by payment of a special fee, was an old man who had been the manager of a big brokerage concern until his growing addiction to drink and later to drugs had rendered him undependable. But old Bronson certainly did know the fundamentals and intricacies of the kind of big business which is straight, and it was a delight to him to pour out his knowledge to a keen intelligence.

Larry, in his own words, simply "mopped it up." His experience had been so wide and varied that he now had only to be shown a bone of fact and almost instantly he visioned in their completeness unextinct ichthyosauri of business. By day he fairly consumed old Bronson; he read dry books far into the night. Thus he rapidly filled the holes in the walls of his knowledge, and strengthened its rather sketchy foundation. Of course he realized that what he was learning was in a sense academic; it had to be tested and developed and made flexible by experience; but then much of it became instantly a living enlargement of the things of which he was already a master.

Old Bronson was delighted; he had never had so apt a pupil. "In less than no time you'll be the real head of that house you're with!" he proudly declared. Larry had not seen it as needful to tell the truth about himself; his casual story was that he was there putting to use a month's holiday granted him by a mythical firm in Chicago.

The Duchess's statement that it would be best for him not to seek work at once was founded on wisdom. Larry was busy and interested, but he did not yet have to face the constant suspicion and hostility which are usually the disheartening lot of the ex-convict who asks for a position. In this period his confidence and his purpose expanded with new vitality.

As the busy days passed down in the little street, the bantering fellowship between Larry and Hunt took deeper root. The Duchess did not again show any of the emotion which had gleamed in her briefly when Larry had announced his new plan; but bent and silent went like an oddly revivified mummy about her affairs. And during these days he did not again see Barney or Old Jimmie; he had learned that on the day following his conference with them they had gone to Chicago on a very private matter of business.

He saw Maggie daily, but she maintained the same attitude toward him. He was now conscious that he was in love. He saw splendid qualities in her, most of them latent. Maggie had determination, high spirits, cleverness, courage, and capacity for sympathy and affection; she had head, heart, and beauty, the makings of an unusual woman, if only she could be swung into a different attitude of mind. But he realized that there was small chance indeed of his working any alteration in her, much less winning her admitted regard, until he was definitely a success, until he had definitely proven himself right. So he took her rebuffs with a smile, and waited his time.

He understood her point of view, and sympathized with her; for her point of view had once been his own. With a growing understanding he saw her as the natural product of such a fathership as Old Jimmie's, and of the cynical environment which Old Jimmie had given her in which crime was a matter of course. In this connection one matter that had previously interested him began to engage his speculation more and more. All her life, until recently, Old Jimmie had apparently shown little more concern over Maggie than one shows over a piece of baggage which is stored in this and that warehouse — and so valueless a piece of baggage in Old Jimmie's case that it had always been stored in the worst warehouses. What was behind Old Jimmie's new interest in his daughter?

Old Jimmie had in late months awakened to the value to him of Maggie as a business proposition — that was Larry's answer to his own question.

As for Maggie, during these days, the mere fact that Larry smiled at her and refused to get angry angered her all the more. Her anger at him, the manner in which he had refused her offered and long-dreamed-of partnership, would not permit her pride and self-confidence to consider any justification for him to enter her mind and argue in his behalf. The great dream she had nourished had been destroyed. And, moreover, he had proclaimed himself a fool.

Yes, despite him and all he could do, she was going to go the brilliant, exciting way she had planned!

In fairness to Maggie it must be remembered that despite her assumed maturity and self-confident wisdom, she really was only eighteen, and perhaps did not yet fully know herself, and had all the world yet to learn. And it must be remembered that she believed herself entirely in the right. This was a world where strength and cunning were the qualities that counted, and every one was trying to outwit his neighbor; and all who acted otherwise were either weak-witted fools or else pretenders who saw in their hypocrisy the keenest game of all. Living under the influence of Old Jimmie, and later of Barney, and of the environment in which she had been bred, these beliefs had come to be her religion. She was thoroughly orthodox, and had the defensive and aggressive fervor which is the temper of militant orthodoxy.

And so more keenly than ever, because she was more determined than ever, Maggie studied the groups of well-dressed men and women who ate and danced at the Ritzmore, among whom she circulated in her short, smart skirt with her cigarette tray swung from her neck by a broad purple ribbon. Particularly she liked the after-theater crowd, for then only evening wear was permitted in the supper-room and the people were at their liveliest. She liked to watch the famous professional couple do their specialties on the glistening central space with the agile spot-lights always bathing them; and then watch the smartly dressed guests take the floor with the less practiced and more humble steps. Sometime soon she was going to have clothes as smart as any of these. Soon she would be one of these brilliant people, and have a life more exciting than any. Very soon — for her apprenticeship was almost over!

Barney Palmer had these last few months, since he had discovered in Maggie a star who only needed coaching and then an opportunity, made it a practice to come for Maggie occasionally when one o'clock, New York's curfew hour, dispersed the pleasure-seekers and ended Maggie's day of work, or rather her day of intensive schooling for her greater life. On the night of his return from Chicago, which was a week after his break with Larry, Barney reported to take Maggie home. He was in swagger evening clothes and he asked the starter for a taxi; with an almost lordly air and for the service of a white-gloved gesture to a chauffeur, he carelessly handed the starter (who, by the way, was a richer man than Barney) a crisp dollar bill. Barney was trying to make his best impression.

"Seen much of that stiff, Larry Brainard?" he asked when the cab was headed southward.

His tone, which he tried to make merely contemptuous, conveyed the deep wrath which he still felt whenever his mind reverted to Larry. Maggie reserved to herself the privilege of thinking of Larry just as she pleased; but being the kind of girl she was, she could not help being also a bit of a coquette.

"I did n't think he was such a stiff, Barney," she said in an irritatingly pleasant voice. "His prison clothes were bad, but now that he's dressed right I think he looks awfully nice. You and father have always said he looked the perfect swell."

"See here — has he been talking to you?" Barney demanded savagely.

"A little. Yes, several times. In fact he said quite a lot that night after you'd gone."

"What did he say?"

"He said he was not only going to go straight, but" — in her provocative, teasing voice — "he was going to make me go straight."

"What's that? Tell me just what he said!" demanded Barney, his wrath suddenly flaring into furious jealousy.

Maggie told him in detail; in fact told him the scene in greater detail and with a greater length than had been the actuality. Also she censored the scene by omitting her own opposition to Larry's determination. She enjoyed playing with Barney, the exercise of the power she had over Barney's passions.

"And you stood for all that!" cried Barney. By this time they were far down town. "You listen to me, Maggie: What I said to Larry's face that night at the Duchess's still stands. I think he's yellow and has turned against his old pals. I tell you what, I'm going to watch that guy!"

"You won't find it hard to watch him, Barney. Larry never hides himself."

"Oh, I'll watch him all right! And you, Maggie — why, you talk as though you liked that line of talk he gave you!"

"Larry talks well — and I did like it, rather."

"See here! You're not falling for him? You're not going to let him make you go straight?"

Maggie certainly had no intention of letting any such thing come to pass; but she could not check her innocent-toned baiting.

"How do I know what he'll make me do? He's clever and handsome, you know."

Barney gripped her shoulder fiercely. "Maggie — are you falling in love with him?"

"How do I know, when —"

"Maggie!" He gripped her more tightly, and his phrases tumbled out fiercely, rapidly. "You're not going to do anything of the sort! If he goes straight — if you go straight — how can he ever help you? He can't! And it will be your finish — the finish of all the big things we've talked about. Listen: since Larry threw us down, I've taken hold of things and will soon be ready to spring something big. Just a few days now and you'll be out of that dirty street, and you'll be in swell clothes doing swell work — and it will mean the best restaurants, theaters, swell times!"

The car had turned into the narrow, cobbled street and had paused before the Duchess's. Suddenly Barney caught her into his arms.

"And, Maggie, you're going to be mine! We'll have a nifty little place, all right! You know I'm dippy about you. . . . And, Maggie, I don't even want you to go back in there where Larry Brainard is. Let's drive back uptown and start in together now! To-night!"

It was not the fact that he had not suggested marriage which stirred Maggie: men and women in Barney's class lived together, and sometimes they were married and sometimes they were not. It was something else, something of which she was not definitely conscious: but she felt no such momentary thrill, no momentary, dazing surrender, as she had felt the night when Larry had similarly held her.

"Stop that, Barney!" she gasped. "Let me go!" She struggled fiercely, and then tore herself free.

"What's wrong with you?" panted Barney. "You're mine, ain't you?"

"You leave me alone! I'm going to get out!"

She had the door open, and was stepping out when he caught her sleeve. But she pulled so determinedly that to have held her would have meant nothing better than ripping the sleeve out of her coat. So he freed her and followed her across the sidewalk to the Duchess's door.

"What's the idea?" he demanded, choking with fierce jealousy. "It's not Larry, after all? You're not going to let him make you go straight?"

She had recovered her poise, and she replied banteringly:

"As I said, how can I tell what he's going to make me do?"

She heard him draw a deep, quivering breath between clenched teeth; but she could not see how his figure tensed and how his face twisted into a glower.

"Get this, Maggie: Larry Brainard is never going to be able to make you do anything. You get that?"

"Yes, I get it, Barney; good-night," she said lightly.

And Maggie slipped through the door and left Barney trembling in the little street.

CHAPTER IX

MAGGIE, as she mounted to her room, was hardly conscious of the ring of menace in Barney's voice; but once she was in bed, his tone and his words came back to her and stirred a strange uneasiness in her mind. Barney was angry; Barney was cunning; Barney would stop at nothing to gain his ends. What might be behind his threatening words?

The next morning as she was coming in with milk for her breakfast coffee, she met Larry in the Duchess's room behind the pawnshop. He smilingly planted himself squarely in her way.

"See here, Maggie — are n't you ever going to speak to a fellow?"

Something within her surged up impelling her to tell him of Barney's savage yet unformulated threat. The warning got as far as her tongue, and there halted, struggling.

Her strange, fixed look startled Larry. "Why, what's the matter, Maggie?" he exclaimed.

But her pride, her settled determination to unbend to him in no way and to have no dealings with him, were stronger than her impulse; and the struggling warning remained unuttered.

"Nothing's the matter," she said, and brushed past him and hurried up the stairway.

At times during the day, while tutoring with Mr. Bronson, Larry thought of Maggie's strange look. And his mind was upon it late in the afternoon when he entered the little street. But as he neared his grandmother's house all such thought was banished by Detective Gavegan of the Central Office stepping from the pawnshop and blocking the door with his big figure. There was grim, triumphant purpose on the hard features of Gavegan, conceited by nature and trained to harsh dominance by long rule as a petty autocrat.

"Hello, Gavegan," Larry greeted him pleasantly. "Gee, but you look tickled! Did the Duchess give you a bigger loan than you expected on the Carnegie medal you just hocked?"

"You'll soon be cuttin' out your line of comedy." Gavegan slipped his left arm through Larry's right. "You're comin' along with me, and you'd better come quiet."

Larry stiffened. "Come where?"

"Headquarters."

"I have n't done a thing, Gavegan, and you know it! What do you want me for?"

"Me and the Chief had a little talk about you," leered Gavegan. "And now the Chief wants to have a little personal talk with you. He asked me to round you up and bring you in."

"I've done nothing, and I'll not go!" Larry cried hotly.

"Oh, yes, you will!" Gavegan withdrew his right hand from his coat pocket where it had been resting in readiness.

In the hand, its thong about his wrist, was a short leather-covered object filled with lead. "I've got my orders, and you'll come peaceably, or — But I'd just as soon you'd resist, for I owe you something for the punch you slipped over on me the other night."

Larry, taut with the desire to strike, gazed for a moment into the glowering face of the detective. Gavegan, gripping his right arm, with that bone-crushing slug-shot itching for instant use, was apparently master in the present circumstances. But before Larry's quick mind had decided upon a course, the door of the pawnshop opened and closed, and a voice said sharply:

"Nothing doing on that rough stuff, Gavegan!" The speaker was now on Larry's left side, a heavy-faced man in a black derby. "Larry, better be a nice boy and come with us."

"Oh, it's you, Casey!" said Larry. "If you say I've got to go, I'll go — for you're one white copper, even if you do have Gavegan for a partner. Come on. What're we standing here for?"

The trio made their way out of the narrow street, and after some fifteen minutes of walking through the twisting byways of that part of the city, they passed through the granite doorway at Headquarters and entered the office of Deputy Commissioner Barlow, Chief of the Detective Bureau. Barlow was talking over the telephone in a growling staccato, and the three men sat down. After a moment Barlow banged the receiver upon its hook, and turned upon them. He had a clenched, driving face, with small, commanding eyes. It was his boast that he got results, that it was his policy to make people do what you told 'em. He had no other code.

"Well, Brainard," he snapped, "here you are again. What you up to now?"

"Going to try the straight game, Chief," returned Larry.

"Don't try to put that old bunk over on me!"

"It's not bunk, Chief. It's the real stuff."

"Cut it out, I say! Don't you suppose I had a clever bird like you picked up the minute you landed in the city, and have had you covered ever since? And if you are going straight, what about the session you had with Barney Palmer and Old Jimmie Carlisle the very night you blew in? And I'm on to this bluff of your going to that business institute. So come across, Brainard! I've got your every move covered!"

"I've already come across, Chief," replied Larry, trying to keep his temper in the face of the other's bullying manner. "I told Barney and Old Jimmie that I was through with the old game, and through with them as pals at the old game — that's all there was to that meeting. I'm going to that business institute for the same reason that every other person goes there — to learn. That's all there is to the whole business, Chief: I'm going to go straight."

Chief Barlow, hunched forward, his undershot jaw clenched on a cigar stub, regarded Larry steadily with his beady, autocratic eyes. Barlow was trained to penetrate to the inside of men's minds, and he recognized that Larry was in earnest.

"You mean you *think* you are going to go straight," Barlow remarked slowly and meaningly.

"I *know* I am going to go straight," Larry returned evenly, meeting squarely the gaze of the Chief of Detectives.

"Do you realize, young man," Barlow continued in the same measured, significant tone, "that whether you go straight, and how you go straight, depends pretty much on me?"

"Mind making that a little clearer, Chief?"

"I'll show you part of my hand — just remember that I'm holding back my high cards. I don't believe you're going to go straight, so we'll start with the proposition that you're not going to run straight and work on from there. You're clever, Brainard — I hand you that; and all the classy crooks trust you. That's why I had picked you out for what I wanted long before you left stir. Brainard, you're wise enough to know that some of our best pinches come from tips handed us from the inside. Brainard" — the slow voice had now become incisive, mandatory — "you're *not* going to go straight. You're going to string along with Barney and Old Jimmie and the rest of the bunch — we'll protect you — and you're going to slip us tips when something big is about to be pulled off."

Larry, experienced with police methods though he was, could hardly believe this thing which was being proposed to him, Larry Brainard. But he controlled himself.

"If I get you, Chief, you are suggesting that I become a police stool?"

"Exactly. We'll never tip your hand. And any little thing you pull off on your own we'll not bother you about. And, besides, we'll slip you a little dough regular on the quiet."

"And all you want me to do in exchange," Larry asked quietly, "is to hand up my pals?"

"That's all."

Larry found it required his all of strength to control himself; but he did.

"There are only three small objections to your proposition, Chief."

"Yes?"

"The first is, I shall not be a stool."

"What's that?"

"And the second is, I would n't squeal on a pal to you even if I were a crook. And the third is what I said in the beginning: I'm not going to be a crook."

Barlow's squat, powerful figure arose menacingly. Casey also stood up.

"I tell you you *are* going to be a crook!" Barlow's big fist crashed down on his desk in a tremendous exclamation point. "And you're going to work for me exactly as I tell you!"

"I have already given you my final word," said Larry.

"You — you —" Barlow almost choked at this quiet defiance. His face turned red, his breath came in a fluttering snarl, his powerful shoulders hunched up as if he were about to strike. But he held back his physical blows.

"That's your ultimatum?"

"If you care to call it so — yes."

"Then here's mine! I told you I was holding back my high cards. Either you do as I say, and work with Gavegan and Casey, or you'll not be able to hold a job in New York! My men will see to that. And here's another high card. You do as I've said, or I'll hang some charge on you, one that'll stick, and back up the river you'll go for another stretch! There's an ultimatum for you to think about!"

It certainly was. Larry gazed into the harsh, glaring face, set in fierce determination. He knew that Barlow, as part of his policy, loved to break down the spirit of criminals; and he knew that nothing so roused Barlow as opposition from a man he considered in his power. Close beside the Chief he saw the gloating, malignant face of Gavegan; Casey, who had been restless since the beginning of the scene, had moved to the window and was gazing down into Center Street.

For a moment Larry did not reply. Barlow mistook Larry's silence for wavering, or the beginning of an inclination to yield.

"You turn that over in your noodle," Barlow drove on. "You're going to go crooked, anyhow, so you might as well go crooked in the only way that's safe for you. I'm going to have Gavegan and Casey watch you, and if in the next few days you don't begin to string along with Barney and Old Jimmie and that bunch, and if you don't get me word that your answer to my proposition is 'yes,' hell's going to fall on you! Now get out of here!"

Larry got out. He was liquid lava of rage inside; but he had had enough to do with police power to know that it would help him not at all to permit an eruption against a police official while he was in the very heart of the police stronghold.

He walked back toward his own street in a fury, beneath which was subconsciously an element of uneasiness: an uneasiness which would have been instantly roused to caution had he known that Barney Palmer had this hour and more been following him in a taxicab, and that across the street from the car's window Barney's sharp face had watched him enter Police Headquarters and had watched him emerge.

Home reached, Larry briefly recounted his experience at Headquarters to Hunt and the Duchess. The painter whistled; the Duchess blinked and said nothing at all.

"Maggie was more right than she knew when she first said you were facing a tough proposition!" exclaimed Hunt. "Believe me, young fellow, you're certainly up against it!"

"Can you beat it for irony!" said Larry, pacing the floor. "A man wants to go straight. His pals ask him to be a crook, and are sore because he won't be a crook. The police ask him to be a crook, and threaten him because he does n't want to be a crook. Some situation!"

"Some situation!" repeated Hunt. "What're you going to do?"

"Do?" Larry halted, his face set with defiant determination. "I'm going to keep on doing exactly what I've been doing! And they can all go to hell!"

CHAPTER X

For several days nothing seemed to be happening, though Larry had a sense that unknown forces were gathering on distant isothermal lines and bad weather was bearing down upon him. During these days, trying to ignore that formless trouble, he gave himself with a most rigid determination to his new routine — the routine which he counted on to help him into the way of great things.

Every day he saw Maggie; sometimes he was in her company for an hour or more. He had the natural hunger of a young man to talk to a young woman; and, moreover, it is a severe strain for a man to be living under the same roof with the girl he loves and not to be on terms of friendship with her. But Maggie maintained her aloofness. She spoke only when she was pressed into it, and her speech was usually no more than a "yes" or a "no," or a flashing phrase of disdain.

At times Larry had the feeling that, for all her repression, Maggie would have been glad to be more free with him. And he knew enough of human nature not to be too disheartened by her attitude. Had he been a nonentity to her, she would have ignored him. Her very insults were proof that he was a positive personality with real significance in her life. And so he counseled himself to have patience and await a thawing or an awaking. Besides, he kept repeating to himself, there would be small chance of effecting a conversion in this militant young orthodoxist of cynicism until he had proved the soundness of contrary views by his own established success.

And thus the days drifted by. But on the fifth day after his interview with Barlow things began to happen. First of all, he noticed in a morning paper that Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt, members of his old outfit and suggested by Old Jimmie as participants in his proposed new enterprise, had just been arrested by Gavegan and Casey on the charge of alleged connection with the sale of fraudulent mining stock.

Second, on his return at the end of the afternoon, he saw standing before the house a taxicab with a trunk beside the chauffeur. In the musty museum of a room behind the pawnshop he found Hunt and the Duchess and Old Jimmie and Barney; and also Maggie, coming down the stairway, hat and coat on and carrying a suitcase. A sharp pain throbbed through him as he recognized the significance of Maggie's hat and coat and baggage.

"Maggie — you're going away?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

She had paused at the foot of the stairway, and at sight of him had gone a little pale and wide-eyed. But in an instant she had recovered her accustomed flair; there came a proud lift to her head, a flash of scorn into her dark eyes.

"At last I'm leaving this street for good," she said. "I told you that some day I was going out into the world and do big things. The time's come — I'm graduated — I'm going to begin real work. And I'm going to succeed — you see!"

"Maggie!" he breathed. Then impulsively he started toward her authoritatively. "Maggie, I'm not going to let you do anything of the sort!"

But swiftly Barney had stepped in between them, Old Jimmie just behind him.

"Keep out of this!" Barney snapped at Larry, a reddish blaze in his eyes. "Maggie's going away and you can't stop her. D'you think her father is going to let her stay down here any longer, where you can spout your preaching at her! — and you all the time a stool and a squealer!"

"What's that?" cried Larry.

"I called you a stool!" repeated the malignantly exultant Barney, alert for any move on the part of the suddenly tensed Larry. "And you are a stool! Did n't I see you myself go into Headquarters with Casey and Gavegan where you sold yourself to Chief Barlow!"

"Why, you damned — "

Even before he spoke Larry launched a furious swing straight from the hip at Barney's twisted face. But Barney had been expecting exactly that, and was even the quicker. He caught Larry's wrist before it was fairly started, and thrust a dull-hued automatic into Larry's stomach.

"Behave, damn you," gritted Barney, "or I'll blow your damned guts out! No,—go ahead and try to hit me. I'd like nothing better than to kill you, you rat, and have a good plea of self-defense!"

Larry let his hands unclench and fall to his sides. "You've got the drop on me, Barney — but you're a liar."

"You bet I got the drop on you! And not only with my gun. I've got it on you about being a stool. Everybody knows you are a stool. And what's more, they know you are a squealer!"

"A squealer!" Larry stiffened again.

"A stool and a squealer!" Barney fairly hurled at Larry these two most despised epithets of his world. "You've done your job swell as a stool, and squealed on Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt and turned them up for the police!"

"You believe I had anything to do with their arrest?" exclaimed Larry.

Barney laughed in his derision.

"Of course we believe it," put in Old Jimmie, his seamed, cunning face now ruthlessly hard. "And what's more, we know it!"

"And what's still more," Barney taunted, "Maggie believes it, too!"

Larry turned to Maggie. Her face was now drawn, with staring eyes.

"Maggie — do you believe it?" he demanded.

For a moment she neither spoke nor moved. Then slowly she nodded.

"But, Maggie," he protested, "I did n't do it! Barlow did ask me to be a stool, but I turned him down! Aside from that, I know no more of this than you do!"

"Of course you'd deny it — we were waiting for that," sneered Barney. "Jimmie, we've wasted enough time here. Take Maggie's bag and let's be moving on."

Old Jimmie picked up Maggie's suitcase, and slipping a hand through her arm led her across the room. She did not even say good-bye to Hunt or the Duchess, or even glance at them; but went out silently, her drawn, staring look on Larry alone.

Barney backed after them, his automatic still held in readiness. "I'm letting you down damned easy, Brainard," he said, hate glittering in his eyes. "But there's some who won't be so nice!"

With that he closed the door. Until that moment both Hunt and the Duchess had said nothing. Now the Duchess spoke up:

"I'm glad they've taken Maggie away, Larry. I've seen the way you've come to feel about her, and she's not the right sort for you."

But Larry was still too dazed by the way in which Maggie had walked out of his life to make any response.

"But there's a lot in what Barney said about there being some who would n't be easy on you," continued the Duchess. "That word had been brought me before Barney showed up. So I had this ready for you."

From a slit pocket in her baggy skirt the Duchess drew out a pistol and handed it to Larry.

"What's this for?" Larry asked.

"I was told that word had gone out to the Ginger Buck Gang to get you," answered the Duchess. "Barney has some secret connection with the Ginger Bucks. His saying that you were a stool and a squealer is not the only thing he's got against you; he's jealous of you on account of everything — especially Maggie. So you'll need that gun."

"What's this I've fallen into the middle of?" exclaimed Hunt. "A Kentucky feud?"

"It's very easy to understand when you know the code," Larry explained grimly. "Down here when an outfit thinks one of its members has squealed on them, it's their duty to be always on the watch for their chance to finish him off. I'm to be finished off — that's all."

"Say, young fellow, the life of a straight crook does n't seem to be getting much simpler! Why, man, you hardly dare to stir from the house! What are you going to do?"

"Going to go around my business, always with the pleasant anticipation of a bullet in my back when some fellow thinks it safe for him to shoot."

The three of them discussed this latest development over their dinner, which they had together up in Hunt's studio. But despite all their talk of his danger, a very real and near danger, Larry's mind was more upon Maggie who had thus suddenly been wrenched out of his life. He remembered her excited, boastful talk of their first evening. Her period of schooling was indeed now over; she was now committed to her rosily imagined adventure, in which she saw herself as a splendid lady. And with Barney Palmer as her guiding influence! . . .

Dinner had been finished and Hunt was trying to give Larry such cheer as "Buck up, young fellow — you know the worst — there's nothing else that can happen," when the lie direct was given to his phrases by heavy steps running up the stairway and the opening and closing of the door. There stood Officer Casey, heaving for breath.

Instinctively Larry drew his pistol. "Casey! What're you here for?"

"Get rid of that gat — don't be found with a gun on," ordered Casey. "And beat it. You've got less than five minutes to make your get-away."

"My get-away! What's up?"

"You have n't come across as the Chief ordered you to, and he's out to give you just what he said he would," Casey said rapidly, his speech broken by panting. "There's been a stick-up, with assault that may be changed to attempted manslaughter, and the Chief has three men who swear you're the guilty party. It's a sure-fire case against you, Larry — and it'll mean five to ten years if you're caught. Gavegan and I got the order to arrest you. I've beat Gavegan to it so's to tip you off, but he's only a few minutes behind. Hurry, Larry! Only — only — "

Casey paused, gasping for his wind.

"Only what, Casey?"

"Only alibi me, Larry, by slipping over a haymaker on me like you did on Gavegan. So's I can say I tried to get you, but you were too quick and knocked me cold. Quick! Only not too hard — I know how to play possum."

Larry handed the pistol to Hunt. "Casey, you're a real scout! Thanks!" He grasped Casey's hand, then swiftly relaxed his grip. "Ready?"

"Fire," said Casey.

Larry held his open left hand close to Casey's jaw, and drove his right fist into his palm with a thudding smack. Casey went sprawling to the floor, and lay there loosely, with mouth agape, in perfect simulation of a man who has been knocked out.

Larry turned quickly. "You two will testify that I beat Casey up and then made my escape?"

"Sure, I'll testify to anything for the sake of a good old goat like Casey!" cried Hunt. "But hurry, boy — beat it!"

The Duchess held out Larry's hat to him, and thrust into his coat pocket a roll of bills which had come from her capacious skirt. "Hurry, Larry — and be careful — for you're all I've got."

Impulsively Larry stooped and kissed the thin, shriveled lips of his grandmother — the first kiss he had ever given her. Then he turned and ran down the stairway, Hunt just behind him. He turned out the light in the back room, and called to Old Isaac to darken the pawnshop proper. He was going forth with two forces in arms against him, the police and his pals, and he had no desire to be a shining mark for either or both by stepping through a lighted doorway.

"Larry, my son, you're all right!" said Hunt, gripping his hand in the darkness. "Listen, boy: if ever you're trapped and can get to a telephone, call Plaza nine-double-o-one and say 'Benvenuto Cellini.'"

"All right."

"Remember, you're to say 'Benvenuto Cellini,' and the telephone is Plaza nine-double-o-one. Luck to you!" Again they gripped hands. Then Larry slipped through the darkened doorway into whatever might lie beyond.

CHAPTER XI

A MISTING rain was being swirled about by a temperish wind as Larry came out into the little street. Down toward the river the one gaslight glowed faintly like an expiring nebula; all the little shops were closed; home lights gleamed behind the curtained windows which the storm had closed; so that the street was now a little canyon of uncertain shadows.

Larry had not needed to think to know that Gavegan would be making his vindictive approach from the westerly regions where lay Headquarters. So, keeping in the deeper shadows close to the building, Larry took the eastern course of the street, remembering in a flash a skiff he had seen tethered to a scow moored to the pier which stretched like a pointer finger from the little Square. As yet he had no plan beyond the necessity of the present moment, which was flight. Could he but make that skiff unseen and cast off, he would have time, in the brief sanctuary which the black river would afford him, to formulate the wisest procedure his predicament permitted him.

As he came near that smothered glow-worm of a street-lamp it assumed for him the betraying glare of a huge spot-light. But it had to be passed to gain the skiff; and with collar turned up and hat-brim pulled down and head hunched low, he entered the dim sphere of betrayal, walked under its penny's-worth of flame, and glided toward the shadows beyond, his eyes straining with the preternatural keenness of the hunted at every stoop and doorway before him.

He was just passing out of the sphere of mist-light — the lamp being now at his back helped him — when he saw three vague figures lurking half a dozen paces ahead of him. His brain registered these vague figures with the instantaneity of a snapshot camera at full noon. They were mere shadows; but the farther of the three seemed to be Barney Palmer — he was not sure; but of the identity of the other two there was no doubt: "Little Mick" and " Lefty Ed," both members high in the councils of the Ginger Bucks, and either of whose services as a killer could be purchased for a hundred dollars or a paper of cocaine, depending upon which at the moment there was felt the greater need.

In the very instant that he saw, Larry doubled about and ran at full speed back up the street. Two shots rang out; Larry could not tell whether they were fired by Little Mick or Lefty Ed or Barney Palmer — that is, if the third man really were Barney. Again two shots were fired, then came the sound of pursuing feet. Luckily not one of the bullets had touched Larry; for the New York professional gunman is the premier bad shot of all the world, and cannot count upon his marksmanship, unless he can get his weapon solidly anchored against his man, or can sneak around to the rear and pot his unsuspecting victim in the back.

As Larry neared the pawnshop, with the intention of making his escape through the western stretch of the street, he saw that Old Isaac had switched on the lights; and he also saw Officer Gavegan bearing down in his direction. They sighted each other in the same instant, and Gavegan let out a roar and started for him.

Caught between two opposing forces, Larry again had no time to plan. Rather, there was nothing he could plan, for only one way was open to him. He dashed into the pawnshop and into the back room. At the Duchess's desk Hunt was scribbling at furious speed.

"I'm caught, Hunt — Gavegan's coming," he gasped, and ran up the stairs, Hunt following and stuffing his scribblings into a pocket. As Larry passed the open studio door he saw Casey sitting up. "Down on the floor with you, Casey! Hunt, work over him to bring him to — and stall Gavegan for a while if you can."

With that Larry sprang to a ladder at the end of the little hall, ran up it, unhooked and pushed up the trap, scrambled through upon the roof, and pushed the trap back into place.

Fortune, or rather the well-wishing wits of friends below, gave Larry a few precious moments more than he had counted on. He was barely out on the rain-greased tin roof, with the trap down, when Gavegan came thumping up the stairs and into the studio. At sight of the recumbent Casey, head limply on Hunt's knees, and his loose face being laved by a wet towel in Hunt's hands, Gavegan let out another roar:

"Hell's bells! What the hell's this mean?"

"I tried to nab Brainard," Casey mumbled feebly, "and he knocked me out cold — the same as he did you, Gavegan."

"Hell!" snorted Gavegan, his wrath increased by this reference. "You there" — to Hunt and the Duchess — "where'd Brainard go? He's in this house some place!"

"I don't know," said Hunt.

"Yes, you do! Leave that boob side-kick of mine sleep it off, and help me find Brainard or you'll feel my boot!"

The big painter stood up facing the big detective and his left hand gripped the latter's wrist and his right closed upon the detective's throat just as it had closed upon the lean throat of Old Jimmie on the day of Larry's return — only now there was nothing playful in the noose of that big hand. He shook Gavegan as he might have shaken a pillow, with a thumb thrusting painfully in beneath Gavegan's ear.

"I've done nothing, and that bully stuff does n't go with me!" he fairly spat into Gavegan's face. "You talk to me like a gentleman and apologize, or I'll throw you out of the window and let your head bounce off one of its brother cobblestones below!"

Gavegan choked out an apology, whereat Hunt flung him from him. The detective, glowering at the other, pulled aside curtains, peered into corners; then made furious and fruitless search of the rooms below, bringing up at last at Maggie's door, which the Duchess had slipped ahead of him and locked. When he demanded the key, the Duchess told him of Maggie's departure and her carrying the key with her. It was a solid door, with strong lock and hinges; and two minutes of Gavegan's battering shoulders were required to make it yield entrance. Not till he found the room empty did Gavegan think of the trap and the roof.

Larry made good use of these few extra minutes granted him. Whatever he was to do he realized he must do it quickly. Not for long would the forces arrayed against him be small in number; Gavegan, though beaten at the outset, would send out an alarm that would arouse the police of the city — and in their own degree the gangsters would do the same. During his weeks of freedom Larry had unconsciously studied the layout of the neighborhood, his old instincts at work. The subconscious knowledge thus gained was of instant value. He hurried along the slippery roofs, taking care not to trip over the dividing walls, and came to the rear edge of a roof where he had marked a fire-escape with an unusually broad upper landing. He could discern the faint outlines of this; and hanging to the gutter he dropped to the fire-escape, and a moment later he was down in the back yard; and yet two moments later he was over two fences and going through a rabbit's burrow of a passageway that went beneath a house into the street behind his own.

He did not pause to reconnoiter. Time was of the essence of his safety, risks had to be taken. He plunged out of his hole — around the first corner — around the next — and thus wove in and out, working westward, till at last, on turning a corner into a lighted street, he saw possible relief in two stray taxicabs before a little East Side restaurant, one of which was just leaving.

"Taxi!" he called breathlessly.

The chauffeur of the moving car swung back beside the curb and opened the door. But even as he started to enter he saw Little Mick and Lefty Ed turn into the street behind him. However, the brightness of this street ill-accorded with the anonymity with which their art is most safely and profitably practiced, so Larry got in without a bullet flicking at him.

"Forty-Second Street and Broadway," he called to the chauffeur as he closed the door.

The car started off. Looking back through the little window he saw Lefty Ed enter the other taxicab, and saw Little Mick standing on the curb. He understood. Little Mick was to send out the alarm, while Lefty was to follow the trail.

Let Lefty follow. At least Larry now had a few minutes to consider some plan which should look beyond the safety of the immediate moment. He was well-dressed, albeit somewhat wet and soiled; he had money in his pockets. What should he do?

Yes, what should he do? The more he considered it the more ineluctable did his situation become. By now Gavegan had sent out his alarm; within a few moments every policeman on duty would have instructions to watch for him. He might escape for the time, at least, these allies of his one-time pals by going to a hotel and taking a room there; but to walk into a hotel would be to walk into arrest. On the other hand, he might evade the police if he sought refuge in one of his old haunts, or perhaps with old Bronson; but then his angered pals knew of these haunts, and to enter one of them would be to offer himself freely to their vengeance.

There were other cities — but then how was he to get to them? He saw Manhattan for what it was to a man who was a fugitive from justice and injustice: an island, a trap, with only a few outlets and inlets for its millions: two railway stations — a few ferries — a few bridges — a few tunnels: and at every one of them policemen watching for him. He could not leave New York. And yet how in God's name was he to stay here?

He thought of Maggie. So she wanted the life of dazzling excitement, of brilliant adventure, did she? He wondered how she would like a little of the real thing — such as this?

As he neared Forty-Second Street he still was without definite plan which would guarantee him safety, and there was Lefty hanging on doggedly. An idea came which would at least extend his respite and give him more time for thought. He opened the door of his cab and thrust a ten-dollar note into the instinctively ready hand of his driver.

"Keep the change—and give me a swing once around Central Park, slowing down on those hilly turns on the west side."

"I gotcha."

The car entered the park at the Plaza and sped up the shining, almost empty drive. Larry kept watch, now on the trailing Lefty, now on the best chance for execution of his idea — all the way up the east side and around the turn at the north end. As the car, now south-bound, swung up the hill near One Hundred and Fifth Street, at whose crest there is a sharp curve with thick-growing, overhanging trees, Larry opened the right door and said:

"Show me a little speed, driver, as soon as you pass this curve!"

"I gotcha," replied the chauffeur.

The slowing car hugged the inside of the sharp turn, Larry holding the door open and waiting his moment. The instant the taxi made the curve Lefty's car was cut from view; and that instant Larry sprang from the running-board, slamming the door behind him, landed on soft earth and scuttled in among the trees. Crouching in the shadows he saw his car speed away as per his orders, and the moment after he saw Lefty's car, evidently taken by surprise by this obvious attempt at escape, leap forward in hot pursuit.

Larry slipped farther in among the trees and sat down, his back against a tree. This was better. For the time he was safe.

He drew a long breath. Then for a moment what he had just been through this last hour came back to him in an almost amusing light: as something grotesquely impossible — much like those helter-skelter, utterly unreal chases which, with slight variations of personalities and costumes, were the chief plots for the motion-picture drama in its crude childhood. But though there seemed a likeness, there was a tremendous difference. For this was real! Every one was in earnest!

Again he thought of Maggie. What would she think, what would be her attitude, if she knew the truth about him? — the truth about those she had gone with and the life she had gone into? Would she be inclined toward *him*, would she help him? . . .

Again he thought of what he should do. Now that he commanded a composure which had not been his during the stress of his flight, he examined every aspect with greater care. But the conclusions of composure were the same as those of excitement. He could not gain entrance to one of the great hotels and remain in his room, unidentified among its thousands of strangers; he could not find asylum in one of his old haunts; he dared not try to leave Manhattan. He was a prisoner, whose only privilege was a larger but most uncertain liberty.

And that liberty was becoming penetratingly uncomfortable. An hour had passed, the ground on which he sat was wet and cold, and the misty air was assuming a distressing kinship with departed winter and was making shivering assaults upon his bones. At the best, he realized, he could not hope to remain secure in this cultivated wilderness beyond daylight. With the coming of morning he would certainly be the prey of either his pals or the police. And if they did not beat him from his hiding, plain mortal hunger would drive him out into the open streets. If he was to do anything at all, he must do it while he still had the moderate protection of the night.

And then for the first time there came to him remembrance of Hunt's rapid injunction, given him in the hurly-burly of escape when no thoughts could impress the upper surface of his mind save those of the immediate moment. "If you're trapped, call Plaza nine-double-o-one and say 'Benvenuto Cellini.'"

Larry had no idea what that swift instruction might be about. And the chance seemed a slender, fantastical one, even if he could safely get to a public telephone. But it seemed his only chance.

He arose, and, keeping as much as he could to the wilder regions of the park, and making the utmost use of shadows when he had to cross a path or a drive, he stole southward. He remembered a drug-store at Eighty-Fourth Street and Columbus Avenue, peculiarly suited to his purpose, for it had a side entrance on Eighty-Fourth Street and was in a neighborhood where policemen were infrequent.

Fortune favored him. At length he reached Eighty-Fourth Street and peered over the wall. Central Park West was practically empty of automobiles, for the theaters had not yet discharged their crowds and no policeman was in sight. He vaulted the wall; a minute later he was in a booth in the drug-store, had dropped his nickel in the slot, and was asking for Plaza nine-double-o-one.

"Hello, sir!" responded the very correct voice of a man.

"Benvenuto Cellini," said Larry.

"Hold the wire, sir," said the voice.

Larry held the wire, wondering. After a moment the same correct voice asked where Larry was speaking from. Larry gave the exact information.

"Stay right in the booth, and keep on talking; say anything you like; the wire here will be kept open," continued the voice. "We'll not keep you waiting long, sir."

The voice ceased. Larry began to chat about topics of the day, about invented friends and engagements, well knowing that his stream of talk was not being heard unless Central was "listening in"; and knowing also that, to any one looking into the glass door of his booth, he was giving a most unsuspicious appearance of a busy man. And while he talked, his wonder grew. What was about to happen? What was this Benvenuto Cellini business all about?

He had been talking for fifteen minutes or more when the glass door of the booth was opened from without and a man's voice remarked:

"When you are through, sir, we will be going."

The voice was the same he had heard over the wire. Larry hung up and followed the man out the side door, noting only that he had a lean, respectful face. At the curb stood a limousine, the door of which was opened by the man for Larry. Larry stepped in.

"Are you followed, sir?" inquired the man.

"I don't know."

"We'd better make certain. If you are, we'll lose them, sir. We'll stop somewhere and change our license plates again."

Instead of getting into the unlighted body with him, as Larry had expected, the man closed the door, mounted to the seat beside the chauffeur, and the car shot west and turned up Riverside Drive.

One may break the speed laws in New York if one has the speed, and if one has the ability to get away with it. This car had both. Never before had Larry driven so rapidly within New York City limits; he knew this, that any trailing taxicab would be lost behind. At Two-Hundred-and-Forty-Fifth Street the car swung into Van Cortlandt Park, and switched off all lights. Two minutes later they halted in a dark stretch of one of the by-roads of the Park.

"We'll be stopping only a minute, sir, to put on our right number plates," the man opened the door to explain.

Within the minute they were away again, now proceeding more leisurely, in the easy manner of a private car going about its private business — though the interior of the car was discreetly dark and Larry huddled discreetly into a corner. Thus they drove over the Grand Boulevards and recrossed the Harlem River and presently drew up in front of a great apartment house in Park Avenue.

The man opened the door. "Walk right in, sir, as though you belong here. The doorman and the elevator-man are prepared."

They might be prepared, but Larry certainly was not; and he shot up the elevator to the top floor with mounting bewilderment. The man unlocked the door of an apartment, ushered Larry in, took his wet hat, then ushered the dazed Larry through the corner of a dim-lit drawing-room and through another door.

"You are to wait here, sir," said the man, and quietly withdrew.

Larry looked about him. He took in but a few details, but he knew enough about the better fittings of life to realize that he was in the presence of both money and the best of taste. He noted the log fire in the broad fireplace, comfortable chairs, the imported rugs on the gleaming floor, the shelves of books which climbed to the ceiling, a quaint writing-desk in one corner which seemed to belong to another country and another century, but which was perfectly at home in this room.

On the desk he saw standing a leather-framed photograph which seemed familiar. He crossed and picked it up. Indeed it was familiar! It was a photograph of Hunt: of Hunt, not in the shabby, shapeless garments he wore down at the Duchess's, but Hunt accoutered as might be a man accustomed to such a room as this — though in this picture there was the same strong chin, the same belligerent good-natured eyes.

Now how and where did that impecunious, rough-neck painter fit into —

But the dazed question Larry was asking was interrupted by a voice from the door — the thick voice of a man:

"Who the hell 'r' you?"

Larry whirled about. In the doorway stood a tall, bellicose young gentleman of perhaps twenty-four or five, in evening dress, flushed of face, holding unsteadily to the door-jamb.

"I beg your pardon," said Larry.

"'N' what the hell you doin' here?" continued the belligerent young gentleman.

"I'd be obliged to you if you could tell me," said Larry.

"Tryin' to stall, 'r' you," declared the young gentleman with a scowling profundity. "No go. Got to come out your corner 'n' fight. 'N' I'm goin' lick you."

The young man crossed unsteadily to Larry and took a fighting pose.

"Put 'em up!" he ordered.

This was certainly a night of strange adventure, thought Larry. His wild escape — his coming to this unknown place — and now this befuddled young fellow intent upon battle with him.

"Let's fight to-morrow," Larry suggested soothingly.

"Put 'em up!" ordered the other. "If you don't know what you're doin' here, I'll show you what you're doin' here!"

But he was not to show Larry, for while he was uttering his last words, trying to steady himself in a crouch for the delivery of a blow, a voice sounded sharply from the doorway — a woman's voice:

"Dick!"

The young man slowly turned. But Larry had seen her first. He had no chance to take her in, that first moment, beyond noting that she was slender and young and exquisitely gowned, for she swept straight across to them.

"Dick, you're drunk again!" she exclaimed.

"Wrong, sis," he corrected in an injured tone. "It's same drunk."

"Dick, you go to bed!"

"Now, sis —"

"You go to bed!"

The young man wavered before her commanding gaze. "Jus's you say—jus's you say," he mumbled, and went unsteadily toward the door.

The young woman watched him out, and then turned her troubled face back to Larry. "I'm sorry Dick behaved to you as he did."

And then before Larry could make answer, her clouded look was gone. "So you're here at last, Mr. Brainard." She held her hand out, smiling a smile that by some magic seemed to envelop him within an immediate friendship. "I'm Miss Sherwood." He noted that the slender, tapering hand had almost a man's strength of grip. "You need n't tell me anything about yourself," she added, "for I already know a lot — all I need to know: about you — and about Maggie Carlisle. You see an hour ago a messenger brought me a long letter he'd written about you." And she nodded to the photograph Larry was still holding.

"You — you know him?" Larry stammered.

She answered with a whimsical smile: "Yes. Is n't he a grand, foolish old dear? He's such a roistering, bragging personage that I've named him Benvenuto Cellini — though he's neither liar nor thief. He must have told you what I called him."

So that explained this password of "Benvenuto Cellini"! "No, he did n't explain anything. There was no time."

"I don't know where he is," she continued; "please don't tell me. I don't want to know until he wants me to know."

Larry had been making a swift appraisal of her. She was perhaps thirty, fair, with golden-brown hair held in place by a large comb of wrought gold, with violet-blue eyes, wearing a low-cut gown of violet chiffon velvet and dull gold shoes. Larry's instinct told him that here was a patrician, a thoroughbred: with poise, with a knowledge of the world, with whimsical humor, with a kindly understanding of people, with steel in her, and with a smiling readiness for almost any situation.

"I think no one will find you—at least for the present," her pleasantly modulated voice continued. "There are so many things I want to talk over with you. Perhaps I can help about Maggie. I hope you don't mind my talking about her." Larry could not imagine any one taking offense at anything this brilliant apparition might possibly say. "But we'll put off our talk until to-morrow. It's late, and you're wet and cold, and besides, my aunt is having one of her bad spells and thinks she needs me. Judkins will see to you. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Larry.

She moved gracefully out — almost floated, Larry would have said. The next moment the man was with him who had been his escort here, and led Larry into a spacious bedroom with bath attached. Ten minutes later Judkins made his exit, carrying Larry's outer clothes; and another ten minutes later, after a hot bath, and garbed in silk pajamas which Judkins had produced, Larry was in the softest and freshest bed that had ever held him.

But sleep did not come to Larry for a long time. He lay wondering about this golden-haired, poiseful Miss Sherwood. She was undoubtedly the woman in the back of Hunt's life. And he wondered about Hunt — who he really was — what had really driven him into this strange exile. And he wondered about Maggie — what she might be doing — what from this strange new vantage-point he might do for her and with her. And he wondered how his own complex situation was going to work itself out.

And still wondering, Larry at length fell asleep.

CHAPTER XII

When Larry awoke the next morning, he blinked for several bewildered moments about his bedroom, so unlike his cell at Sing Sing and so unlike Hunt's helter-skelter studio down at the Duchess's which he had shared, before he realized that this big, airy chamber and this miracle of a bed on which he lay were realities and not a mere continuation of a dream of fantastic and body-flattering wealth.

Then his mind turned back a page in the book of his life and he lay considering the events of the previous evening: the scene with Barney and Old Jimmie and Maggie, their all denouncing him as a police stool-pigeon and a squealer, and Maggie's defiant departure to begin her long-dreamed-of career as a leading-woman and perhaps star in what she saw as great and thrilling adventures; his own enforced and frenzied flight; his strange method of reaching this splendid apartment; his meeting with the handsome, drink-befuddled young man in evening clothes; his meeting with the exquisitely gowned patrician Miss Sherwood, who had received him with the poise and frank friendliness of a democratic queen, and had immediately ordered him off to bed.

Strange, all of these things! But they were all realities. And in this new set of circumstances which had come into being in a night, what was he to do?

He recalled that Miss Sherwood had said that she and he would have their talk that morning. He pulled his watch from under his pillow. It was past nine o'clock. He looked about him for clothes, but saw only a bathrobe. Then he remembered Judkins carrying off his rain-soaked garments, with "Ring for me when you wake up, sir."

Larry found an electric bell button dangling over the top of his bed by a silken cord. He pushed the button and waited. Within two minutes the door opened, and Judkins entered, laden with fresh garments.

"Good-morning, sir," said Judkins. "Your own clothes, and some shirts and other things I've borrowed from Mr. Dick. How will you have your bath, sir — hot or cold?"

"Cold," said the bewildered Larry.

Judkins disappeared into the great white-tiled bathroom, there was the rush of splashing water for a few moments, then silence, and Judkins reappeared.

"Your bath is ready, sir. I've laid out some of Mr. Dick's razors. How soon shall I bring you in your breakfast?"

"In about twenty minutes," said Larry.

Exactly twenty minutes later Judkins carried in a tray, and set it on a table beside a window looking down into Park Avenue. "Miss Sherwood asked me to tell you she would see you in the library at ten o'clock, sir — where she saw you last night," said Judkins, and noiselessly was gone.

Freshly shaven, tingling from his bath, with a sense of being garbed flawlessly, though in garments partly alien, Larry addressed himself to the breakfast of grapefruit, omelette, toast and coffee, served on Sèvres china with covers of old silver. In his more prosperous eras Larry had enjoyed the best private service that the best hotels in New York had to sell; but their best had been coarse and slovenly compared to this. He would eat for a minute or two — then get up and look at his carefully dressed self in the full-length mirror — then gaze from his high, exclusive window down into Park Avenue with its stream of cars comfortably carrying their occupants toward ten o'clock jobs in Wall or Broad Streets — and then he would return to his breakfast. This was amazing — bewildering!

He was toward the end of his omelette when a knock sounded at his door. Thinking Judkins had returned, he called, "Come in"; but instead of Judkins the opening door admitted the belligerent young man in rumpled evening clothes of the previous night. Now he wore a silk dressing-gown of a flamboyant peacock blue, his feet showed bare in toe slippers, his wavy, yellowish hair had the tousled effect of a very recent separation from a pillow. A cigarette depended from the corner of his mouth.

Larry started to rise. But the young man arrested the motion with a gesture of mock imperativeness.

"Keep your seat, fair sir; I would fain have speech with thee." He crossed and sat on a corner of Larry's table, one slippered foot dangling, and looked Larry over with an appraising eye. "Permit me to remark, sir," he continued in his grand manner, "that you look as though you might be some one."

"Is that what you wanted to tell me, Mr. Sherwood?" queried Larry.

The other's grand manner vanished and he grinned. "Forget the 'Mr. Sherwood,' or you'll make me feel not at home in my own house," he begged with humorous mournfulness. "Call me Dick. Everybody else does. That's settled. Now to the reason for this visitation at such an ungodly hour. Sis has just been in picking on me. Says I was rude to you last night. I suppose I was. I'd had several from my private stock early in the evening; and several more around in jovial Manhattan joints where prohibition has n't checked the flow of happiness if you know the countersign. The cumulative effect you saw, and were the victim of. I apologize, sir."

"That's all right, Mr. —"

"Dick is what I said," interrupted the other.

"Dick, then. It's all right. I understand."

"Thanks. I'll call you Old Captain Nemo for short. Sis did n't tell me your name or anything about you, and she said I was n't to ask you questions. But whatever Isabel does is usually one hundred per cent right. She said I'd probably be seeing a lot of you, so I'll introduce myself. You'd learn all about me from some one else, anyhow, so you might as well learn about me from me and get an impartial and unbiased statement. Clever of me, ain't it, to beat 'em to it?"

Larry found himself smiling back into the ingratiating, irresponsible, boyish face. "I suppose so."

"I'll shoot you the whole works at once. Name, Richard Livingston Sherwood. Years, twenty-four, but alleged not yet to have reached the age of discretion. One of our young flying heroes who helped save France and make the world safe for something or other by flapping his wings over the endless alkali of Texas. Occupation, gentleman farmer."

"You a farmer!" exclaimed Larry.

"A *gentleman* farmer," corrected Dick. "The difference between a farmer and a gentleman farmer, Captain Nemo, is that a gentleman farmer makes no profit on his crops. Now my friends say I'm losing an awful lot of money and am sowing an awfully big crop. And according to them, instead of practicing sensible crop rotation, I'm a foolish one-crop farmer—and my one crop is wild oats."

"I see," said Larry.

"Of course I do do a little something else on the side. Avocation. I'm in the brokerage business. But my chief business is looking after the Sherwood interests. You see, my mother — father died ten years before she did — my mother, being dotty about the innate superiority of the male, left me in control of practically everything, and I do as well by it as the more important occupation of farming will permit. Which completes the racy history of myself."

"I'm sorry I can't reciprocate."

"That's all right, Captain Nemo. There's plenty of time — and it does n't make any difference, anyhow." For all his light manner and careless chatter, Larry had a sense that Dick had been sizing him up all this while; that, in fact, to do this was the real purpose of the present call. Dick slipped to his feet. "If you're just now a bit shy on duds, as I understand you are, why, we're about the same size. Tell Judkins what you want, and make him give you plenty. What time you got?"

"Just ten o'clock."

"By heck — time a farmer was pulling on his overalls and going forth to his dew-gemmed toil!"

"And time for me to be seeing your sister," said Larry, rising.

"Come on. I'm a good seneschal, or major domo, or what you like — and I'll usher you into her highness's presence."

A moment later Larry was pushed through the library door and Dick announced in solemn tone:

"Señorita — Mademoiselle — our serene, revered, and most high sister Isabel, permit us to present our newest and most charming friend, Captain Nemo."

"Dick," exclaimed Miss Sherwood, "get out of here and get yourself into some clothes!"

"Listen to that!" complained Dick. "She still talks to me as though I were her small brother. Next thing she'll be ordering me to wash behind my ears!"

"Get out, and shut the door after you!"

The reply was Dick's stately exit and the sharp closing of the door.

"Has Dick been talking to you about himself?" asked Miss Sherwood.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

Larry gave the substance of the autobiography which Dick had volunteered.

"Part of that is more than the truth, part less than the truth," Miss Sherwood remarked. "But this morning we were to have a real talk about your affairs, and let's get to the subject."

She had motioned him to a chair beside the quaint old desk, and they were now sitting face to face. Isabel Sherwood looked as much the finished patrician as on the evening before, and with that easy, whimsical humor and the direct manner of the person who is sure of herself; and in the sober, disillusioning daylight she had no less of beauty than had seemed hers in the softer lighting of their first meeting. The clear, fresh face with its violet-blue eyes was gazing at him intently. Larry realized that she was looking into the very soul of him, and he sat silent during this estimate which he recognized she had the right to make.

"Mr. Hunt has written me the main facts about you, certainly the worst," she said finally. "You need tell me nothing further, if you prefer not to do so; but it might be helpful if I knew more of the details."

Larry felt that there was no information he was not willing to give this clear-eyed, charming woman; and so he told her all that had happened since his return from Sing Sing, including his falling in love with Maggie, the nature of their conflict, her departure into the ways of her ambition.

"You are certainly facing a lot of difficult propositions." Miss Sherwood checked them off on her fingers. "The police are after you — your old friends are after you — you do not dare be caught. You want to clear yourself —

you want to make a business success — you want to eradicate Maggie's present ambitions and remove her from her present influences."

"That is the correct total," said Larry.

"Certainly a large total! Of them all, which is the most important item?"

Larry considered. "Maggie," he confessed. "But Maggie really includes all the others. To have any influence with her, I must get out of the power of the police, I must overcome her belief that I am a stool and a squealer, and I must prove to her that I can make a success by going straight."

"Just so. And all these things you must do while a fugitive in hiding."

"Exactly. Or else not do them."

"H'm!... The most pressing thing, I judge, is to have a safe and permanent place to hide, and to have work which may lead to an opportunity to prove yourself a success."

"Yes."

"Mr. Hunt's O.K. on you would be sufficient, in any event, and he has given that O.K.," Miss Sherwood said in her even voice. "Besides, my own judgment prompts me to believe in your truth and your sincerity. I have been thinking the matter over since I saw you last night. I therefore ask you to remain here, never leaving the apartment —"

"Miss Sherwood!" he ejaculated.

"And a little later, when we go out to our place on Long Island, you'll have more freedom. For the present you will be, to the servants and any other persons who may chance to come in, Mr. Brandon, a second cousin staying with us; and your explanation for never venturing forth can be that you are convalescing after an operation. Perhaps you can think of a plan whereby later on you might occasionally leave the house without too great risk to yourself."

"Yes. The risk comes from the police, and from some of my old friends and the gangsters they have enlisted. So long as they believe me in New York, they'll all be on the lookout for me every moment. If they believed me out of New York, they would all discontinue their vigilance. If — if — But perhaps you would not care to do so much."

"Go on."

"Would you be willing to write a letter to some friend in Chicago, requesting the friend to post an enclosed letter written by me?"

"Certainly."

"My handwriting would be disguised — but a person who really knows my writing would penetrate the attempted disguise and recognize it as mine. My letter would be addressed to my grandmother requesting her to express my recent purchase of forfeited pledges to me in Chicago. A clever person reading the letter would be certain I was asking her to send me my clothes."

"What's the point to that?"

"One detail of the police's search for me will be to open secretly, with the aid of the postal authorities, all mail addressed to my grandmother. They will steam open this letter about my clothes, then seal it and let it be delivered. But they will have learned that I have escaped them and am in Chicago. They will drop the hunt here and telegraph the Chicago police. And of course the news will leak through to my old friends, and they'll also stop looking for me in New York."

"I see."

"And enclosed in another letter written by you, I'll send an order, also to be posted in Chicago, to a good friend of mine asking him to call at the express office, get my clothes, and hold them until I call or send for them. When he goes and asks for the clothes, the Chicago police will get him and find the order on him. They'll have no charge at all against him, but they'll have further proof that I'm in Chicago or some place in the Middle West. The effect will be definitely to transfer the search from New York."

"Yes, I see," repeated Miss Sherwood. "Go ahead and do it; I'll help you. But for the present you've got to remain right here in the apartment, as I said. And later, when you think the letters have had their effect, you must use the utmost caution."

"Certainly," agreed Larry.

"Now as to your making a start in business. I suspect that my affairs are in a very bad shape. Things were left to my brother, as he told you. I have a lot of papers, all kinds of accounts, which he has brought to me and he's bringing me a great many more. I can't make head or tail of them, and I think my brother is about as much befuddled as I am. I believe only an expert can understand them. Mr. Hunt says you have a very keen mind for such matters. I wish you'd take charge of these papers, and try to straighten them out."

"Miss Sherwood," Larry said slowly, "you know my record and yet you risk trusting me with your affairs?"

"Not that I would n't take the risk — but whatever there is to steal, some one else has already stolen it, or will steal it. Your work will be to discover thefts or mistakes, and to prevent thefts or mistakes if you can. You see I am not placing any actual control over stealable property in you — not yet. . . . Well, what do you say?"

"I can only say, Miss Sherwood, that you are more than good, and that I am more than grateful, and that I shall do my best!"

Miss Sherwood regarded him thoughtfully for a long space. Then she said: "I am going to place something further in your hands, for if you are as clever as I think you are, and if life has taught you as much as I think it has, I believe you can help me a lot. My brother Dick is wild and reckless. I wish you'd look out for him and try to hold him in check where you can. That is, if this is n't placing too great a duty on you."

"That's not a duty — it's a compliment!"

"Then that will be all for the present. I'll see you again in an hour or two, when I shall have some things ready to turn over to you."

Back in his bedroom Larry walked exultantly to and fro. He had security! And at last he had a chance — perhaps the chance he had been yearning for through which he was ultimately to prove himself a success! . . .

He wondered yet more about Miss Sherwood. And again about her and Hunt. Miss Sherwood was clever, gracious, everything a man could want in a woman; and he guessed that behind her humorous references to Hunt there was a deep feeling for the big painter who was living almost like a tramp in the attic of the Duchess's little house. And Larry knew Miss Sherwood was the only woman in Hunt's life; Hunt had said as much. They were everything to each other; they trusted each other. Yet there was some wide breach between the two; evidently his own crisis had forced the only communication which had passed between the two for months. He wondered what that breach could be, and what had been its cause.

And then an idea began to open its possibilities. What a splendid return, if, somehow, he could do something that would help bring together these two persons who had befriended him! . . .

But most of the time, while he waited for Miss Sherwood to summon him again, he wondered about Maggie. Yes, as he had told Miss Sherwood, Maggie was the most important problem of his life: all his many other problems were important only in the degree that they aided or hindered the solution of Maggie. Where was she? — what was she doing? — how was he, in this pleasant prison which he dared not leave, ever to overcome her scorn of him, and ever to divert her from that dangerous career in which her proud and excited young vision saw only the brilliant and profitable adventure of high romance?

CHAPTER XIII

When Maggie rode away forever from the house of the Duchess with Barney Palmer and her father, after the denunciation of Larry by the three of them as a stool and a squealer, she was the thrilled container of about as many diversified emotions as often bubble and swirl in a young girl at one and the same time. There was anger and contempt toward Larry: Larry who had weakly thrown aside a career in which he was a master, and who had added to that bad the worse of being a traitor. There was the lifting sense that at last she had graduated; that at last she was set free from the drab and petty things of life; that at last she was riding forth into the great brilliant world in which everything happened — forth into the fascinating, bewildering Unknown.

Barney and Old Jimmie talked to each other as the taxicab bumped through the cobbled streets, their talk being for the most part maledictions against Larry Brainard. But their words were meaningless sounds to the silent Maggie, all of whose throbbing faculties were just then merged into an excited endeavor to perceive the glorious outlines of the destiny toward which she rode. However, as the cab turned into Lafayette Place and rolled northward, her curiosity about the unknown became conscious and articulate.

"Where am I going?" she asked.

"First of all to a nice, quiet hotel." It was Barney who answered; somehow Barney had naturally moved into the position of leader, and as naturally her father had receded to second place. "We've got everything fixed, Maggie. Rooms reserved, and a companion waiting there for you."

"A companion!" exclaimed Maggie. "What for?"

"To teach you the fine points of manners, and to help you buy clothes. She's a classy bird all right. I advertised and picked her out of a dozen who applied."

"Barney!" breathed Maggie. She was silent a dazed moment, then asked: "Just — just what am I going to do?"

"Listen, Maggie: I'll spill you the whole idea. I'd have told you before, but it's developed rather sudden, and I've not had a real chance, and, besides, I knew you'd be all for it. Jimmie and I have canned that stock-selling scheme for good — unless an easy chance for it develops later. Our big idea now is to put *you* across!" Barney believed that there might still remain in Maggie some lurking admiration for Larry, some influence of Larry over her, and to eradicate these completely by the brilliance of what he offered was the chief purpose of his further quick-spoken words. "To put you across in the biggest kind of a way, Maggie! A beautiful, clever woman who knows how to use her brains, and who has brainy handling, can bring in more money, and in a safer way, than any dozen men! And I tell you, Maggie, I'll make you a star!"

"Barney! . . . But you have n't told me just what I'm to do."

"The first thing will be just a try-out; it'll help finish your education. I've got it doped out, but I'll not tell you till later. The main idea is not to use you in just one game, Maggie, but to finish you off so you'll fit into dozens of games — be good year after year. A big actress who can step right into any big part that comes her way. That's what pays! I tell you, Maggie, there's no other such good, steady proposition on earth as the right kind of woman. And that's what you're going to be!"

Maggie had heard much this same talk often before. Then it had been vague, and had dealt with an indefinite future. Now she was too dazzled by this picture of near events which the eager Barney was drawing to be able to make any comment.

"I'll be right behind you in everything, and so will Jimmie," Barney continued in his exciting manner — "but you'll be the party out in front who really puts the proposition over. And we'll keep to things where the police can't touch us. Get a man with coin and position tangled up right in a deal with a woman, and he'll never let out a peep and he'll come across with oodles of money. Hundreds of ways of working that. A strong point about you, Maggie, is you have no police record. Neither have I, though the police suspect me — but, as I said, I'll keep off the stage as much as I can. I tell you, Maggie, we're going to put over some great stuff! Great, I tell you!"

Maggie felt no repugnance to what had been said and implied by Barney. How could she, when since her memory began she had lived among people who talked just these same things? To Maggie they seemed the natural order. At that moment she was more concerned by a fascinating necessity which Barney's flamboyant enterprise entailed.

"But to do anything like that, won't I need clothes?"

"You'll need 'em, and you'll have 'em! You're going to have one of the swellest outfits that ever happened. You'll make Paris ashamed of itself!"

"No use blowing the whole roll on Maggie's clothes," put in Old Jimmie, speaking for the first time.

Barney turned on him caustically, almost savagely. "You're a hell of a father, you are — counting the pennies on his own daughter! I told you this was no piker's game, and you agreed to it — so cut out the idea you're in any nickel-in-the-slot business!"

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Old Jimmie felt physical pain at the thought of parting from money on such a scale. His earlier plans concerning Maggie had never contemplated any such extravagance. But he was silenced by the dominant force behind Barney's sarcasm.

"Miss Grierson — she's your companion — knows what's what about clothes," continued Barney to Maggie. "Here's the dope as I've handed it to her. You're an orphan from the West, with some dough, who's come to New York as my ward and Jimmie's and we want you to learn a few things. To her and to any new people we meet I'm your cousin and Jimmie is your uncle. You've got that all straight?"

"Yes," said Maggie.

"You're to use another name. I've picked out Margaret Cameron for you. We can call you Maggie and it won't be a slip-up — see? If any of the coppers who know you should tumble on to you, just tell 'em you dropped your own name so's to get clear of your old life. They can't do anything to you. And tell 'em you inherited a little coin; that's why you're living so swell. They can't do anything about that either. . . . Here's where we get out. Got a sitting-room, two bedrooms and a bath hired for you here. But we'll soon move you into a classier hotel."

The taxi had stopped in front of one of the unpretentious, respectable hotels in the Thirties, just off Fifth Avenue, and Maggie followed the two men in. This hotel did, indeed, in its people, its furnishings, its atmosphere, seem sober and commonplace after the Ritzmore; but at the Ritzmore she had been merely a cigarette-girl, a paid onlooker at the gayety of others. Here she was a real guest — here her great life was beginning! Maggie's heart beat wildly.

Up in her sitting-room Barney introduced her to Miss Grierson, then departed with a significant look at

Old Jimmie, saying he would return presently and leaving Old Jimmie behind. Old Jimmie withdrew into a corner, turned to the racing part of the *Evening Telegram*, which, with the corresponding section of the *Morning Telegraph*, was his sole reading, and left Maggie to the society of Miss Grierson.

Maggie studied this strange new being, her hired "companion," with furtive keenness; and after a few minutes, though she was shyly obedient in the manner of an untutored orphan from the West, she had no fear of the other. Miss Grierson was a large, flat-backed woman who was on the descending slope of middle age. She was really a "gentlewoman," in the self-pitying and self-praising sense in which those who advertise themselves as such use that word. She was all the social forms, all the proprieties. She was deferentially autocratic; her voice was monotonously dignified and cultured; and she was tired, which she had a right to be, for she had been in this business of being a gentlewomanly hired aunt to raw young girls for over a quarter of a century.

To the tired but practical eye of Miss Grierson, here was certainly a young woman who needed a lot of working over to make into a lady. And though weary and unthrillable as an old horse, Miss Grierson was conscientious, and she was going to do her best.

Maggie made a swift survey of her new home. The rooms were just ordinary hotel rooms, furnished with the dingy, wholesale pretentiousness of hotels of the second rate. But they were the essence of luxury compared to her one room at the Duchess's with its view of dreary back yards. These rooms thrilled her. They were her first material evidence that she was now actually launched upon her great adventure.

Maggie had dinner in her sitting-room with Old Jimmie and Miss Grierson—and of that dinner, mediocre and sloppy, and chilled by its transit of twelve stories from the kitchen, Miss Grierson, by way of an introductory lesson, made an august function, almost diagrammatic in its educational details. After the dinner, with Miss Grierson's slow and formal aid, which consisted mainly in passages impressively declaimed from her private book of decorum, Maggie spent two hours in unpacking her suitcase and trunk, and repacking her scanty wardrobe in drawers of the chiffonier and dressing-table; a task which Maggie, left to herself, could have completed in ten minutes.

Maggie was still at this task in her bedroom when she heard Barney enter her sitting-room. "He got away," she heard him say in a low voice to Old Jimmie.

She slipped quickly out of her bedroom and closed the door behind her. An undefined something had suddenly begun to throb within her.

"Who got away, Barney?" she demanded in a hushed tone.

Her look made Barney think rapidly. He was good at quick thinking, was Barney. He decided to tell the truth — or part of it.

"Larry Brainard."

"Got away from what?" she pursued.

"The police. They were after him on some charge. And some of his pals were after him, too. They were out to get him because he had squealed on Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt. Both parties were closing in on him at about the same time. But Larry got a tip somehow, and made his get-away."

"When did it happen?"

"Must have happened a little time after we all left the Duchess's."

"But — but, Barney — how did you learn it so soon?"

"Just ran into Officer Gavegan over on Broadway and he told me," lied Barney. He preferred not to tell her that he had been upon the scene with Little Mick and Lefty Ed; for the third figure which Larry had descried through the misty shadows had indeed been Barney Palmer. Also Barney preferred not to tell what further subtle share he had had in the causes for Larry's flight.

"Do you think he — he made a safe get-away?"

"Safe for a few hours. Gavegan told me they'd have him rounded up by noon to-morrow." Barney was more conscious of Maggie's interest than was Maggie herself, and again was desirous of destroying it or diverting it. "Generally I'm for the other fellow against the police. But this time I'm all for the coppers. I hope they land Larry — he's got it coming to him. Remember that he's a stool and a squealer."

And swiftly Barney switched the subject. "Let's be moving along, Jimmie."

He drew Maggie out into the hall, to make more certain that Miss Grierson would not overhear. "Well, Maggie," he exulted, "have n't I made good so far in my bargain to put you over?"

"Yes."

"Of course we're going slow at first. That's how you've got to handle big deals — careful. But you'll sure be a knock-out when that she-undertaker in there gets you rigged out in classy clothes. Then the curtain will go up on the real show — and it's going to be a big show — and you'll be the hit of the piece!"

With that incitement to Maggie's imagination Barney left her; and Old Jimmie followed, furtively giving Maggie a brief, uncertain look.

CHAPTER XIV

A BLOCK away from the hotel Barney parted from Old Jimmie. For a space Barney thought of his partner. Barney had quick eyes which were quite capable of taking in two things at once; and while he had seen the excited glow his final speech had brought back into Maggie's face, he had also caught that swift look of uncertainty in the lean, cunning face of Old Jimmie: a look of one who is eager to go on, yet sees himself frustrated by his own eagerness. To Barney it was a puzzling, suspicious look.

As Barney made his way toward a harbor of refreshment he wondered about Old Jimmie — not in the manner Larry had wondered about a father bringing his daughter up into crooked ways — but he wondered what kind of a man beneath his shrewd, yielding, placating manner Old Jimmie really was, how far he was to be trusted, whether he was in this game on the level or whether he was playing some very secret hand of his own. Though he had known and worked with Old Jimmie for years, Barney had never been admitted to the inner chambers of the older man's character. He sensed that there were hidden rooms and twisting passages; and of this much he was certain, that Old Jimmie was sly and saturnine.

Well, he would be on guard that Old Jimmie did n't put anything over on your obliging servant, Barney Palmer!

This was the era of legal prohibition, but thus far Barney had not been severely discommoded by the action of the representatives of America's free institutions in Washington, for Barney knew his New York. In an ex-saloon on Sixth Avenue, which nominally sold only the soft drinks permitted by the wise men of the Capital, Barney leaned at his ease upon the bar and remarked: "Give me some of the real stuff, Tim, and forget that eye-dropper the boss bought you last week." Barney had a drink of the real stuff, and then another drink, in the measuring of neither of which had an eye-dropper been involved.

After that, much heartened, he put two dollars upon the bar and went his way. His course took the dapper Barney into three of the gayest restaurants in the Times Square section; and in these Barney paused long enough to speak to a few after-theater supper-parties. For this was the hour when Barney paid his social calls; he was very strict with himself upon this point. Barney was really by way of being a rising figure in this particular circle of New York society composed of people who had or believed they had an interest in the theater, of expensively gowned women the foreground of whose lives was most attractive, but whose background was perhaps wisely kept out of the picture, and of moneyed young men who gloried in the idea that they were living the life. These social calls from gay table to gay table, at all of which Barney was welcome — for here Barney showed only his most attractive surfaces, his most brilliant facets — were in truth a very important part of Barney's business.

A little later, alone at a corner table in a quieter restaurant, Barney was eating his supper and making an inventory of his prospects. He was in a very exultant mood. The whiskey he had drunk had given broad wings to his self-satisfaction; and what he was now sipping from his tea-cup — it was not tea, for Barney was on the proper terms with his waiter here — this draught from his tea-cup tipped these broad wings at a yet more soaring angle.

Yes, he had certainly put it over so far. And Maggie would certainly prove a winner. Those fair women he had chatted with as he had moved from table to table, why, they'd be less than dirt compared to Maggie when Maggie was rigged out and readied up and the stage was set. And it had been he, Barney Palmer, who had been the first to discover Maggie's latent possibilities!

He had an eye beyond mere surfaces, had Barney. He had used women in the past in putting over many of his more private transactions (and had done so partly for the reason that using women so was eminently "safe" — this despite his violent outburst of sneering disdain at Larry when the latter had spoken of safety): some of them professional sharpers, some unscrupulous actresses of the lower flight — such women as he had just chatted with in the restaurants where he had made his brief visits. But such, he now recognized, were rather *blasées*, rather too obvious. They were the blown rose. But Maggie was fresh, and once she was properly broken in, she would be his perfect instrument. Yes, perfect!

Barney's plans soared on. Some day, when it fitted in just right with his plans, he was going to marry Maggie. It was only recently that he had seen her full charms, and still more recently that he had determined upon marriage. That decision had materially altered certain details of the career Barney had blue-printed for himself. Barney had long regarded marriage as an asset for himself; a valuable resource which he must hold in reserve and not liquidate, or capitalize, until his own market was at its peak. He knew that he was good-looking, an excellent dancer, that he had the metropolitan finish. He had calculated that sometime some rich girl, perhaps from the West, who did not know the world too well, would fall under the spell of his charms; and he would marry her promptly while she was still infatuated, before she could learn too much about him. Such had been Barney's idea of marriage for himself; which is very similar to ideas held by thousands of gentlemen, young and otherwise, in this broad land of ours, who consider themselves neither law-breakers nor adventurers.

But that was all changed now. Now it was Maggie, though Maggie in pursuit of their joint advantage might possibly first have to go through the marriage ceremony with some other man. Of course, a very, very rich man! Barney already had this man marked. He hoped, though, they would not have to go so far as marriage. However, he was willing to wait his proper turn. As he had told Maggie, you could not put over a big thing in a hurry.

As for Larry, he'd certainly handled that business in a swell fashion! He'd certainly put a crimp in what had been developing between Larry and Maggie. And he'd get Larry in time, too. The drag-net was too large and close of mesh for Larry to hope to escape it. The word he'd slipped that boob Gavegan had sure done the business! And the indirect way he had tipped off the police about Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt and had then made his pals think Larry had squealed — that was sure playing the game, too! Jack and Red would get off easy — there was nothing on them; but little old Barney Palmer had certainly used his bean in the way he had set the machinery of the police and the underworld in motion against Larry!

While other occupants of the café, particularly the women, stole looks at the handsome, flawlessly dressed, interesting-looking Barney, Barney had yet another of those concoctions which the discreet waiter served in a tea-cup. He'd done a great little job, you bet! Not another man in New York could have done better. He was sure going to put Maggie across! And in doing so, he was going to do what was right by yours truly.

All seemed perfect in Barney's world. . . .

And while Barney sat exulting over triumphs already achieved and those inevitably to be achieved, Maggie lay in her new bed dreaming exultant dreams of her own:

heedless of the regular snoring which resounded in the adjoining room — for the excellent Miss Grierson, while able to keep her every act in perfect form while in the conscious state, unfortunately when unconscious had no more control of the goings-on of her mortal functions than the lowliest washwoman. Maggie's flights of fancy circled round and round Larry. She stifled any excuses or insurgent yearnings for him. He'd deserved what he had got. Already, contrary to his predictions, she had made a tremendous advance into her brilliant future. She would show him! Yes, she would show him! Oh, but she was going to do things!

But while she dreamed thus, shaping a magnificent destiny — an independent, self-engineered young woman, so very, very confident of the great future she was going to achieve through the supremacy of her own will and her own abilities — no slightest surmise came into her mind that Barney Palmer was making plans by which her will was to count as naught and by which he was to be the master of her fate, and that the furtive, yielding Old Jimmie was also dreaming a patient dream in which she was to be a mere chess-piece which was to capture a long-cherished game.

And yet, after all, Maggie's dreams, aside from the peculiar twist life had given them, were fundamentally just the ordinary dreams of youth: of willful confident youth, to whom but a small part of the world has yet been opened, who in fact does not yet half know its own nature.

CHAPTER XV

No prison could have been more agreeable — that is, no prison from which Maggie was omitted — than this in which Larry was now confined. He had the run of the apartment; Dick Sherwood outfitted him liberally with clothing from his superabundance of the best; Judkins and the other servants treated him as the member of the family which they had been informed he was; the lively Dick, with his puppy-like friendliness, asked never an uncomfortable question, and placed Larry almost on the footing of a chum; and the whimsically smiling Miss Sherwood treated Larry exactly as she might have treated any well-bred gentleman and in every detail made good on her promise to give him a chance. In fact, in all his life Larry had never lived so well.

As for Miss Sherwood's aunt, a sister of Miss Sherwood's mother and a figure of pale, absent-minded dignity, she kept very much to her own sitting-room. She was a recent convert to the younger English novelists, and was forced to her seclusion by the amazing fecundity with which they kept repopulating her reading-table. Larry she accepted with a hazy, preoccupied politeness, eager always to get back to the more substantial characters of her latest fiction.

Of course Miss Sherwood did not make of Larry a complete confidant. For all her smiling, easy frankness, he knew that there were many doors of her being which she never unlocked for him. What he saw was so interesting that he could not help being interested about the rest. Of course many details were open to him. She was an excellent sportswoman; a rare dancer; there were many men interested in her; she dined out almost every other evening at some social affair blooming belatedly in May (most of her friends were already settled in their country homes, and she was still in town only because her place on Long Island was in disorder due to a two months' delay in the completion of alterations caused by labor difficulties); she had made a study of beetles; she had a tiny vivarium in the apartment and here she would sit studying her pets with an interest and patience not unlike that of old Fabre upon his stony farm. Also, as Larry learned from her accounts, there was a day nursery on the East Side whose lack of a deficit was due to her.

All in all she was a healthy, normal, intelligent, unself-sacrificing woman who belonged distinctly to her own day; who gave a great deal to life, and who took a great deal from life.

Often Larry wished she would speak of Hunt. He was curious about Hunt, of whom he thought daily; and such talk might yield him information about the blustering, big-hearted painter who was gypsying it down at the Duchess's. But as the days passed she never mentioned Hunt again; not even to ask where he was or what he was doing. She was adhering very strictly to the remark she had made the night Larry came here: "I don't want to know until he wants me to know." And so Hunt remained the same incomplete picture to Larry; the painter was indubitably at home in such surroundings as these, and he was at home as a roistering, hard-working vagabond at the Duchess's — but all the vast spaces between were utterly blank, except for the sketchy remarks Hunt had made concerning himself.

Larry had guessed that hurt pride was the reason for Hunt's vanishment from the world which had known him. But he knew hurt pride was not Miss Sherwood's motive for making no inquiries. Anger? No. Jealousy? No. Some insult offered her? No. Larry went through the category of ordinary motives, of possible happenings; but he could find none which would reconcile her very keen and kindly feeling for Hunt with her abstinence from all inquiries.

From his first day in his sanctuary Larry spent long hours every day over the accounts and documents Miss Sherwood had put in his hands. They were indeed a tangle. Originally the Sherwood estate had consisted of solid real-estate holdings. But now that Larry had before him the records of holdings and of various dealings he learned that the character of the Sherwood fortune had altered greatly. Miss Sherwood's father had neglected the care of this sober business in favor of speculative investment and even outright gambling in stocks; and Dick, possessing this strain of his father, and lacking his father's experience, had and was speculating even more wildly.

Larry had followed the market since he had been in a broker's office almost ten years earlier, so he knew what stock values had been and had some idea of what they were now. The records, and some of the stock Larry found in the safe, recalled the reputation of the elder Sherwood. He had been known as a spirited, daring man who would buy anything or sell anything; he had been several times victimized by sharp traders, some of these out-and-out confidence men. Studying these old records Larry remembered that the elder Sherwood a dozen years before had lost a hundred thousand in a mining deal which Old Jimmie Carlisle had helped manipulate.

Larry found hundreds and hundreds of thousands of stock in the safe that were just so much waste paper, and he found records of other hundreds of thousands in safety deposit vaults that had no greater value. The real estate, the more solid and to the male Sherwoods the less interesting part of the fortune, had long been in the care of agents; and since Larry was prohibited from going out and studying the condition and true value of these holdings, he had to depend upon the book valuations and the agents' reports and letters. Upon the basis of these valuations he estimated that some holdings were returning a loss, some a bare one and a half per cent, and some running as high as fifteen per cent. Larry found many complaints from tenants; some threatening letters from the Building Department for failure to make ordered alterations to comply with new building laws; and some rather perfunctory letters of advice and recommendation from the agents themselves.

From Miss Sherwood Larry learned that the agents were old men, friends of her father since youth; that they had both made comfortable fortunes which they had no incentive to increase. Larry judged that there was no dishonesty on the part of the agents, only laxity, and an easy adherence to the methods of their earlier years when there had not been so much competition nor so many building laws. All the same Larry judged that the real-estate holdings were in a bad way.

Larry liked the days and days of this work, although the farther he went the worse did the tangle seem. It was the kind of work for which his faculties fitted him, and this was his first chance to use his faculties upon large affairs in an honest way. Thus far his work was all diagnostic; cure, construction, would not come until later — and perhaps Miss Sherwood would not trust him with such affairs. This investigation, this checking up, involved no risk on her part as she had frankly told him. The other would: it would mean at least partial control of property, the handling of funds.

Miss Sherwood had many sessions with him; she was interested, but she confessed herself helpless in this compilation and diagnosis of so many facts and figures. Dick was prompt enough to report his stock transactions, and he was eager enough to discuss the probable fluctuation of this or that stock; but when asked to go over what Larry had done, he refused flatly and good-humoredly to "sit in any such slow, dead game."

"If my Solomon-headed sister is satisfied with what you're doing, Captain Nemo, that's good enough for me," he would say. "So forget that stuff till I'm out of sight. Open up, Captain — what do you think copper is going to do?"

"I wish you could be put on an operating-table and have your speculative streak knifed out of you, Dick. That oil stock you bought the other day — why, a blind man could have seen it was wild-cat. And you were wiped out."

"Oh, the best of 'em get aboard a bad deal now and then."

"I know. But I've been tabulating all your deals to date, and on the total you're away behind. Better leave the market absolutely alone, Dick, and quit taking those big chances."

"You've got to take some big chances, Captain Nemo" — Dick had clung to the title he had lightly conferred on Larry the morning he had come in to apologize — "or else you'll never make any big winnings. Besides, I want a run for my money. Just getting money is n't enough. I want a little pep in mine."

Larry saw that these talks on the unwisdom of speculation he was giving Dick were not in themselves enough to effect a change in Dick. Mere words were colorless and negative; something positive would be required.

Larry hesitated before he ventured upon another matter he had long considered. "Excuse my saying it, Dick. But a man who's trying to do as much in a business way as you are, particularly since it's plain speculation, can't afford to go to after-theater shows three times a week and to late suppers the other four nights. Two and three o'clock is no bedtime hour for a business man. And that boot-legged booze you drink when you're out does n't help you any. I know you think I'm talking like a fossilized grand-aunt — but all the same, it's the straight stuff I'm handing you."

"Of course it's straight stuff — and you're perfectly all right, Captain Nemo." With a good-natured smile Dick clapped him on the shoulder. "But I'm all right, too, and nothing and nobody is going to hurt me. Got to have a little fun, have n't I? As for the booze, I'm merely making hay while the sun shines. Soon there'll be no sun — I mean no booze."

Larry dropped the subject. In his old unprincipled days his practice had been much what he had suggested to Dick; as little drink as possible, and as few late nights as possible. He had needed all his wits all the time. In this matter of hilarious late hours, as in the matter of speculation, Larry recognized words alone, however good, would have little effect upon the pleasure-loving, friendly, likable Dick. An event, some big experience, would be required to check him short and bring him to his senses.

While Larry was keeping at this grind something was happening to Larry of which he was not then conscious: something which was part of the big development in him that was in time to lead him far. A confidence man is essentially a "sure-thing" gambler. It had been Larry's practice, before the law had tripped him up, to study every detail of an enterprise he was planning to undertake, to know the psychology of the individuals with whom he was dealing, to eliminate every perceivable uncertainty: that was what had made almost all of his deals "sure things." Strip a clever knave of all intent or inclination for knavery, and leave all his other qualities and practices intact and eager, and you have the makings of a "sure-thing" business man: — a man who does not cheat others, and who takes precious care that his every move is sound and forward-looking. Aside from the moral element involved, the difference between the two is largely a difference in percentage: say the difference between a thousand per cent profit and six per cent profit. The element of trying to play a "safe thing" still remains.

This transformation of character, under the stimulus of hard, steady work upon a tangled thing which contained the germ of great constructive possibilities for some one, was what was happening unconsciously to Larry.

CHAPTER XVI

ALL this while Maggie, and what he was to do about her, and how do it, was in Larry's mind. Even this work he was doing for Miss Sherwood, he was doing also for Maggie, in the hope that in some unseen way it might lead him to her and help lead her to herself. There were difficulties enough between them, God knew; but of them all two were forever presenting themselves as foremost: first, he did not dare go openly to see her; and, second, even if he so dared he did not know where she was.

When he had been with the Sherwoods some three weeks Larry determined upon a preliminary measure. By this time he knew that the letters mailed from Chicago, according to the plan he had arranged with Miss Sherwood, had had their contemplated effect. He knew that he was supposed by his enemies to be in Chicago or some other Western point, and that New York was off its guard as far as he was concerned.

His preliminary measure was to discover, if possible, Maggie's whereabouts. The Duchess seemed to him the most likely source of information. He dared not write asking her for this, for he was certain her mail was still being scrutinized. The safest method would be to call at the pawnshop in person; the police, and his old friends, and the Ginger Bucks would expect anything else before they would expect him to return to his grandmother's. Of course he must use all precautions.

Incidentally he was prompted to this method by his desire to see his grandmother and Hunt. He had an idea or two which he had been mulling over that concerned the artist.

He chose a night when a steady, blowing rain had driven all but limousined and most necessitous traffic from the streets. The rain was excuse for a long raincoat with high collar which buttoned under his nose, and a cap which pulled down to his eyes, and an umbrella which masked him from every direct glance. Thus abetted and equipped he came, after a taxi ride and a walk, into his grandmother's street. It was as seemingly deserted as on that tumultuous night when he had left it; and on this occasion no figures sprang out of the cover of shadows, shooting and cursing. He had calculated correctly; and unmolested he gained the pawnshop door, passed the solemn-eyed, incurious Isaac, and entered the room behind.

His grandmother sat over her accounts at her desk in a corner among her curios. Hunt, smoking a black pipe, was using his tireless right hand in a rapid sketch of her: another of those swift, few-stroked, vivid character notes which were about his studio by the hundreds. The Duchess saw Larry first; and she greeted him in the same unsurprised, emotionless manner as on the night he had come back from Sing Sing.

"Good-evening, Larry," said she.

"Good-evening, grandmother," he returned.

Hunt came to his feet, knocking over a chair in so doing, and gripped Larry's hand. "Hello — here's our wandering boy to-night! How are you, son?"

"First-rate, you old paint-slinger. And you?"

"Hitting all twelve cylinders and taking everything on high! But say, listen, youngster: how about your copper friends and those gun-toting schoolmates of yours?"

"Missed them so far."

"Better keep on missing 'em." Hunt regarded him intently for a moment, then asked abruptly: "Never heard one way or another — but did you use that telephone number I gave you?"

"Yes."

"Miss Sherwood take care of you?"

"Yes."

"Still there?"

"Yes."

Again Hunt was silent for a moment. Larry expected questions about Miss Sherwood, for he knew the quality of the painter's interest. But Hunt seemed quite as determined to avoid any personal question relating to Miss Sherwood as she had been about personal questions relating to him; for his next remark was:

"Young fellow, still keeping all those commandments you wrote for yourself?"

"So far, my bucko."

"Keep on keeping 'em, and write yourself a few more, and you'll have a brand-new decalogue. And we'll have a little Moses of our own. But in the meantime, son, what's the great idea of coming down here?"

"For one thing, I came to ask for a couple of your paintings."

"My paintings!" Hunt regarded the other suspiciously. "What the hell you want my paintings for?"

"They might make good towels if I can scrape the paint off."

"Aw, cut out the vaudeville stuff! I asked you what you wanted my paintings for? Give me a straight answer!"

"All right — here's your straight answer: I want your paintings to sell them."

"Sell my paintings! Say, are you trying to say something still funnier?"

"I want them to sell them. Remember I once told you that I could sell them — that I could sell anything. Let me have them, and then just see."

"You'd sure have to be able to sell anything to sell them!" A challenging glint had come into Hunt's eyes. "Young fellow, you're so damned fresh that if you had any dough I'd bet you five thousand, any odds you like, that you couldn't even *give* one of the things away!"

"Loan me five thousand," Larry returned evenly, "and I'll cover the bet with even money — it being understood that I'm to sell the picture at a price not less than the highest price you ever received for one of your 'pretty pictures' which you delight to curse and which made your fortune. Now bring down your pictures — or shut up!"

Hunt's jaw set. "Young fellow, I take that bet! And I'll not let you off, either — you'll have to pay it! Which pictures do you want?"

"That young Italian woman sitting on the curb nursing her baby — and any other picture you want to put with it."

Hunt went clumping up the stairway. When he was out of earshot, the Duchess remarked quietly:

"What did you really come for, Larry?"

Larry was somewhat taken aback by his grandmother's penetration, but he did not try to evade the question nor the steady gaze of the old eyes.

"I thought you might know where Maggie is, and I came to ask."

"That's what I thought."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

The old eyes were still steady upon him. "I don't know that I should tell you. I want you to get on — and the less you have to do with Maggie, the better for you."

"I'd like to know, grandmother."

The Duchess considered for a long space. "After all, you're of age — and you've got to decide what's best for yourself. I'll tell you. Maggie was here the other day — dressed simple — to get some letters she'd forgotten to take and which I could n't find. We had a talk. Maggie is living at the Grantham under the name of Margaret Cameron. She has a suite there."

"A suite at the Grantham!" exclaimed Larry, astounded. "Why, the Grantham is in the same class with the Ritzmore, where she used to work — or the Plaza! A suite at the Grantham!"

And then Larry gave a twitching start. "At the Grantham — alone?"

"Not alone — no. But it's not what just came into your mind. It's a woman that's with her; a hired companion. And they're doing everything on a swell scale."

"What's Maggie up to?"

"She did n't tell me, except to say that the plan was a big one. She was all excited over it. If you want to know just what it is, ask Barney Palmer and Old Jimmie."

"Barney and Old Jimmie!" ejaculated Larry. And then: "Barney and Old Jimmie — and a suite at the Grantham!"

At that moment Hunt came back down the stairway, carrying a roll wrapped in brown paper.

"Here you are, young fellow," he announced. "Demounted 'em so the junk would be easier to handle. The Dago mother you asked for — the second painting may be one you'd like to have for your own private gallery. I'm not going to let you get away with your bluff — and don't you forget it! . . . Duchess, don't you think he'd better beat it before Gavegan and his loving friends take a tumble to his presence and mess up the neighborhood?"

"Yes," said the Duchess. "Good-night, Larry."

"Good-night," said he.

Mechanically he took the roll of paintings and slipped it under his raincoat; mechanically he shook hands; mechanically he got out of the pawnshop; mechanically he took all precautions in getting out of the little rain-driven street and in getting into a taxicab which he captured over near Cooper Institute. All his mind was upon what the Duchess had told him and upon a new idea which was throbbingly growing into a purpose.

Maggie and Barney and Old Jimmie! Maggie in a suite at the Grantham!

What Larry now did, as he got into the taxi, he would have called, footless and foolhardy an hour before, and at any other hour his judgment might have restrained him. But just now he seemed controlled by a force greater than smooth-running judgment — a composite of many forces: by sudden jealousy, by a sudden desire to shield Maggie, by a sudden desire to see her. So as he stepped into the taxi, he said:

"The Grantham — quick!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE taxi went rocking up Fourth Avenue. But now that decision was made and he was headed toward Maggie, a little of judgment reasserted itself. It would not be safe for him to walk openly into the Grantham with a mouthful of questions. He did not know the number of Maggie's suite. And Maggie might not be in. So he revised his plan slightly. He called to his driver:

"Go to the Claridge first."

Five minutes later the taxi was in Forty-Fourth Street and Larry was stepping out. Fortune favored him in one fact — or perhaps his subconscious mind had based his plan upon this fact: the time was half-past ten, the theaters still held their crowds, the streets were empty, the restaurants were practically unoccupied. He was incurring the minimum of risk.

"Wait for me," he ordered the driver. "I'll be out in five minutes."

In less than the half of the first of these minutes Larry had attained his first objective: the secluded telephone-room down behind the grill. It was unoccupied except for the telephone girl who was gazing raptly at the sorrowful, romantic, and very soiled pages of "St. Elmo." The next moment she was gazing at something else — a five-dollar bill which Larry had slipped into the open book.

"That's to pay for a telephone call; just keep the change," he said rapidly. "You're to do all the talking, and say just what I tell you."

"I got you, general," said the girl, emerging with alacrity from romance to reality. "Shoot."

"Call up the Hotel Grantham — say you're a florist with an order to deliver some flowers direct to Miss Margaret Cameron — and ask for the number of her suite — and keep the wire open."

The girl obeyed promptly. In less than a minute she was reporting to Larry:

"They say 1141–1142–1143."

"Ask if she's in. If she is, get her on the 'phone, tell her long distance is calling, but does n't want to speak to her unless she is alone. You get it?"

"Sure, brother. This ain't the first time I helped a party out."

There was more jabbing with the switch-board plug, evident switching at the other end, several questions, and then the girl asked: "Is this Miss Margaret Cameron? Miss Cameron —" and so on as per Larry's instructions.

The operator turned to Larry: "She says she's alone."

"Tell her to hold the wire till you get better connections — the storm has messed up connections terribly — and keep your own wire open and make her hold her end."

As Larry went out he heard his instructions being executed while an adept hand safely banked the bill inside her shirt-waist. Within two minutes his taxi set him down at the Grantham; and knowing that whatever risks he ran would be lessened by his acting swiftly and without any suspicious hesitation, he walked straight in and to the elevators, in the manner of one having business there, his collar again pulled up, his cap pulled down, and his face just then covered with a handkerchief which was caring for a sniffling nose in a highly natural manner.

With his heart pounding he got without mishap to the doors numbered 1141, 1142, and 1143. Instinctively he knew in a general way what the apartment was like: a set of rooms of various character which the hotel could rent singly or throw together and rent *en suite*. But which of the three was the main entrance? He dared not hesitate, for the slightest queer action might get the attention of the floor clerk down the corridor. So Larry chose the happy medium and pressed the mother-of-pearl button of 1142.

The door opened, and before Larry stood a large, elderly, imposing woman in a rigidly formal evening gown — a gown which, by the way, had been part of Miss Grierson's equipment for many a year for helping raw young things master the art of being ladies. Larry surmised at once that this was the "hired companion" his grandmother had spoken of. In other days Larry had had experience with this type and before Miss Grierson could bar him out or ask a question, Larry was in the room and the door closed behind him — and he had entered with the easiest, most natural, most polite manner imaginable.

"You were expecting me?" inquired Larry with his disarming and wholly engaging smile.

Neither Miss Grierson's mind nor body was geared for rapid action. She was taken aback, and yet not offended. So being at a loss, she resorted to the chief item in her stock in trade, her ever dependable dignity.

"I cannot say that I was. In fact, sir, I do not know who you are."

"Miss Cameron knows — and she is expecting me," Larry returned pleasantly. His quick eyes had noted that this was a sitting-room: an ornate, patterned affair which the great hotels seem to order in hundred lots. "Where is Miss Cameron?"

"In the next room," nodding at the connecting door. "She is engaged. Telephoning. A long-distance call. I'm quite sure she is not expecting you," Miss Grierson went on to explain ponderously and elaborately, but with politeness, for this young man was handsome and pleasant and well-bred and might prove to be some one of real importance. "We were to have had a theater party with supper afterwards; but owing to Miss Cameron's indisposition we did not go to the theater. But she insisted on keeping the engagement for the supper, but changing it to here. Besides herself and myself, there are to be only her uncle, her cousin, and just one guest. That is why I am so certain, sir, she is not expecting you."

"But you see," smiled Larry, "I am that one guest."

Miss Grierson shook her carefully coiffured transformation. "I've met the guest who is coming, and I certainly have not met you."

"Then she must have asked two of us. Anyhow, I'll just speak to her, and if I'm mistaken and *de trop*, I'll withdraw." And ere Miss Grierson could even stir up an intention to intervene further, this well-mannered young man had smiled his disarming smile and bowed to her and had passed through the door, closing it behind him.

He halted, the knob in his hand. Maggie was standing sidewise to him, holding a telephone in her hand, its receiver at her ear. She must have supposed that it was Miss Grierson who had so quietly entered, for she did not look around.

"Yes, I'm still waiting," she was saying impatiently. "Can't you ever get that connection?"

Larry had seen Maggie only in the plain dark suit which she had worn to her daily business of selling cigarettes at the Ritzmore; and once, on the night of his return from Sing Sing, in that stage gypsy costume, which though effective was cheap and impromptu and did not at all lift her out of the environment of the Duchess's ancient and grimy house. But Larry was so startled by this changed Maggie that for the moment he could not have moved from the door even had he so desired. She was accoutered in the smartest of filmy evening gowns, with the short skirt which was then the mode, with high-heeled silver slippers, her rounded arms and shoulders and bosom bare, her abundant black hair piled high in careful carelessness. The gown was cerise in color, and from her forearm hung a great fan of green plumes. In all the hotels and theaters of New York one could hardly have come upon a figure that night more striking in its finished and fresh young womanhood. Larry trembled all over; his heart tried to throb madly up out of his throat.

At length he spoke. And all he was able to say was:

"Maggie."

She whirled about, and telephone and receiver almost fell from her hands. She went pale, and stared at him, her mouth agape, her dark eyes wide.

"La-Larry!" she whispered.

"Maggie!" he said again.

"La-Larry! I thought you were in Chicago."

"I'm here now, Maggie — especially to see you." He did not know it, but his voice was husky. He noted that she was still holding the telephone and receiver. "It was I who put in that long-distance call. But I came instead. So you might as well hang up."

She obeyed, and set the instrument upon its little table.

"Larry — where have you been all this while?"

He was now conscious enough to note that there was tense concern in her manner. He exulted at it, and crossed and took her hand.

"Right here in New York, Maggie."

"In hiding?"

"In mighty good hiding."

"But, Larry — don't you know it's dangerous for you to come out? And to come here of all places?"

"I could n't help myself. I simply had to see you, Maggie."

He was still holding her hand, and there was an instinctive grip of her fingers about his. For a moment — the moment during which her outer or more conscious self was startled into forgetfulness — they gazed at each other silently and steadily, eye into eye.

And then the things the Duchess had said crept back into his mind, and he said:

"Maggie, I've come to take you out of all this. Get ready — let's leave at once."

That broke the spell. She jerked away from him, and instantly she was the old Maggie: the Maggie who had jeered at him and defied him the night of his return from prison when he had announced his new plan — the Maggie who had flaunted him as "stool" and "squealer" the evening she had left the Duchess's to enter upon this new career.

"No, you're not going to take me out of this!" she flung at him. "I told you once before that I was n't going your way! I told you that I was going my own way! That held for then, and it holds for now, and it will hold for always!"

The softer mood which had come upon him by surprise at sight of her and filled him, now gave way to grim determination. "Yes, you are coming my way — sometime, if not now! And now if I can make you!"

Their embattled gazes gripped each other. But now Larry was seeing more than just Maggie. He was also taking in the room. It was close kin to the room in which he had left Miss Grierson: ornate, undistinguished, and very expensive. He noted one slight difference: a tiny hallway giving on the corridor, its inner door now opened.

But the greatest difference was what he saw over

Maggie's smooth white shoulders: a table all set with china and glass and silver, and arranged for five.

"Maggie, what's this game you're up to?" he demanded.

"It's none of your business!" she said fiercely, but in a low tone — for both were instinctively remembering Miss Grierson in the adjoining room. And then she added proudly: "But it's big! Bigger than anything you ever dreamed of! And you can see I am putting it across so far — and I'll be putting it across at the finish! Compare it to the cheap line you talked about. Bah!"

"Listen, Maggie!" In his intensity he gripped her bare forearm. "This is bad business, and if you had any sense you'd know it! Don't you think I get the layout? Barney is your cousin, Old Jimmie is your uncle, that dame in the next room and this suite and your swell clothes to help put up a front! And your sickness that would n't let you go to the theater is just a fake, so that, not wanting to disappoint them entirely, you'd have an excuse for having supper here — and thus adroitly draw some person into the trap of a more intimate relationship. It's a clever and classy layout. Maggie, exactly what's your game?"

"I'll not tell you!"

"Who's that man that's coming here?"

"I'll not tell you!"

"Is he the sucker you're out to trim?"

"I'll not tell you!"

"You will tell me!" he cried dominantly. "And you're going to get out of all this! You hear me? It may look good to you now. But I tell you it has only one finish! And that's a rotten finish!"

She tore free from his punishing grip, and pantingly glared at him — her former defiance now an egoistic fury.

"I won't have you interfering with my life! — you fake preacher! — you stool, you squealer!" she flung at him madly. "Stool — squealer!" she repeated. "I tell you I'm going my own way — and it's a big way — and I tell you again nothing you can say or do can stop me! If I could have my best wish, all I'd wish for would be something to keep you from always interfering — something to get you out of my way!"

Panting, she paused. Her tense figure, with hands closing and unclosing, expressed the very acme of furious defiance — of desire to annihilate — of ultimate hatred. Larry was astounded by the very extent, the profundity, of her passion. And so they stood, silent except for their quick breathing, eyes fixed upon eyes, for several moments.

And then a key sounded in the outer door of the little hallway. Instantly there was an almost unbelievable transformation in Maggie. From an imperious, uncontrollable fury, she changed to a white, quivering thing. "Barney!" she whispered; and sprang to the inner door of the little hallway, closed and locked it.

She turned on Larry a face that was ghastly in its pallor.

"Barney always carries a pistol," she whispered.

They had heard the outer door close with a click of its automatic lock. They now heard the knob of the inner door turn and tugged at; and then heard Barney call:

"What's the matter, Maggie? Let us in."

Maggie made a supreme effort to reply in a controlled voice:

"Just a minute. I'm not quite ready."

Then a second voice sounded from the other side of the door:

"Don't keep us too long, Maggie. Please!"

There was a distantly familiar quality to Larry in that second voice. But he did not try to place it then: he was too poignantly concerned in his own situation, and in the bewildering change in Maggie.

She slipped a hand through his arm. "Oh, La-Larry, why did you ever take such a risk!" she breathed. Her whisper was piteous, aquiver with fright. "Come this way!" and she quickly pulled him into the room where he had met Miss Grierson and to the door by which he had entered.

Maggie opened this door. "They're all in the little hallway — I don't think they'll see you," her rapid, agitated whisper went on. "Don't take the elevators in this corridor, they're in plain sight. There are elevators just around the corner. Take them; they're safer. Good-bye, Larry — and, oh, Larry, don't ever take such a risk again!"

With that she pushed him out and closed the door.

Larry followed her instructions about the elevator; he used the same precautions in leaving that he had used in coming, and twenty minutes later he was back in his room in the Sherwood apartment. For an hour or more he sat motionless — thinking — thinking: asking himself questions, but in his tumultuous state of mind and emotions not able to keep to a question long enough to reason out its possible answer.

Just what *was* that game in which Maggie was involved? — a game which required that Grantham setting, that eminently respectable companion, and Maggie's accouterment as a young lady of obvious wealth.

Whose was that vaguely familiar second voice? — that voice which he still could not place.

But what he thought about most of all was something very different. What had caused that swift change in Maggie? — from a fury that was both fire and granite, to that pallid, quivering, whispering girl who had so rapidly led him safely out of his danger.

To and fro, back and forth, shuttled these questions. Toward two o'clock he stood up, mind still absorbed, and mechanically started to undress. He then observed the roll of paintings Hunt had given him. Better for them if they were flattened out. Mechanically he removed string and paper. There on top was the Italian mother he had asked for. A great painting — a truly great painting. Mechanically he lifted this aside to see what was the second painting Hunt had included. Larry gave a great start and the Italian mother went flapping to the floor.

The second painting was of Maggie; the one on which Hunt had been working the day Larry had come back: Maggie in her plain working clothes, looking out at the world confidently, conqueringly; the painting in which Hunt, his brain teeming with ideas, had tried to express the Maggie that was, the many Maggies that were in her, and the Maggie that was yet to be.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE next morning Larry tried to force his mind to attend strictly to Miss Sherwood's affairs. But in this effort he was less than fifty per cent effective. His experience of the night before had been too exciting, too provocative of speculation, too involved with what he frankly recognized to be the major interest of his life, to allow him to apply himself with perfect and unperturbed concentration to the day's routine. Constantly he was seeing the transformed Maggie in the cerise evening gown with the fan of green plumes — seeing her elaborate setting in her suite at the Grantham — hearing that vaguely familiar but unplaceable voice outside her door — recalling the frenzied effort with which Maggie had so swiftly effected his escape.

This last matter puzzled him greatly. If she were so angered at him as she had declared, if she so distrusted him, why had she not given him up when she had had him at her mercy? Could it be that, despite her words, she had an unacknowledged liking for him? He did not dare let himself believe this.

Again and again he thought of this adventure in whose very middle Maggie now was, and of whose successful issue she had proudly boasted to him. It was indeed something big, as she had said; that establishment at the Grantham was proof of this. Larry could now perceive the adventure's general outlines. There was nothing original in what he perceived; and the plan, so far as he could see it, would not have interested him in the least as a novel creation of the brain were not Maggie its central figure, and were not Barney and Old Jimmie her directing agents. A pretty woman was being used as a lure to some rich man, and his infatuation for her was to cause him to part with a great deal of money: some variation of this ancient idea, which has a thousand variations — that was the plan.

Obviously the enterprise was not directed at some gross victim whose palate might permit his swallowing anything. If any one item essentially proved this, it was the item of the overwhelmingly respectable chaperon. Maggie was being presented as an innocent, respectable, young girl; and the victim, whoever he was, was the type of man for whom only such a type of girl would have a compelling appeal.

And this man — who was he? Ever and again he tried to place the man's voice, with its faintly familiar quality, but it kept dodging away like a dream one cannot quite recall.

The whole business made Larry rage within himself. Maggie to be used in such a way! He did not blame Maggie, for he understood her. Also he loved her. She was young, proud, willful, had been trained to regard such adventures as colorful and legitimate; and had not lived long enough for experience to teach her otherwise. No, Maggie was not to blame. But Old Jimmie! He would like to twist Old Jimmie's neck! But then Old Jimmie was Maggie's father; and the mere fact of Old Jimmie being Maggie's father would, he knew, safeguard the old man from his wrath even were he at liberty to go forth and act.

He cursed his enforced seclusion. If only he were free to go out and do his best in the open! But then, even if he were, his best endeavors would have little influence upon Maggie — with her despising and distrusting him as she did, and with her so determined to go ahead in her own way.

Once during the morning, he slipped from the library into his room and gazed at the portrait of Maggie that Hunt had given him the night before: Maggie, self-confident, willful, a beautiful nobody who was staring the world out of countenance; a Maggie that was a thousand possible Maggies. And as he gazed he thought of the wager he had made with Hunt, and of his own rather scatter-brained plannings concerning it. He removed Maggie's portrait from the fellowship of the picture of the Italian mother, and hid it in his chiffonier. Whatever he might do in his endeavor to make good his boast to Hunt, for the present he would regard Maggie's portrait as his private property. To use the painting as he had vaguely planned, before he had been surprised to find it Maggie's portrait, would be to pass it on into other possession where it might become public — where, through some chance, the Maggie of the working-girl's cheap shirt-waist might be identified with the rich Miss Cameron of the Grantham, to Maggie's great discomfiture, and possibly to her entanglement with the police.

When Miss Sherwood came into the library a little later, Larry tried to put Maggie and all matters pertaining to his previous night's adventure out of his mind. He had enough other affairs which he was trying adroitly to handle — for instance, Miss Sherwood and Hunt;

and when his business talk with her was ended, he remarked:

"I saw Mr. Hunt last evening."

He watched her closely, but he could detect no flash of interest at Hunt's name.

"You went down to your grandmother's?"

"Yes."

"That was a very great risk for you to take," she reproved him. "I'm glad you got back safely."

Despite the disturbance Maggie had been to his thoughts, part of his brain had been trying to make plans to forward this other aim; so he now told Miss Sherwood of his wager with Hunt and his bringing away a picture — he said "one picture." He wanted to awaken the suppressed interest each had in the other; to help bridge or close the chasm which he sensed had opened between them. So he brought the picture of the Italian mother from his room. She regarded it critically, but with no sign of approval or disapproval.

"What do you think of it?" she asked.

"It's a most remarkable piece of work!" he said emphatically — wishing he could bring in that picture of Maggie as additional evidence supporting his opinion.

She made no further comment, and it was up to Larry to keep the conversation alive. "What is the most Mr. Hunt ever was paid for a painting? I mean one of what he swears at as his 'pretty pictures'?"

"I believe about two thousand dollars."

That was part of the information necessary to Larry's plan.

"Miss Sherwood, I'm going to ask another favor of you. In connection with a bet I made with Mr. Hunt. I want to talk with a picture dealer — the best one there is. I can't very well go to him. Can you manage to have him come here?"

"Easily. I know the man best for your purpose. I'll telephone, and if he's in New York he'll come to see you this afternoon."

"Thank you."

She started out, then turned. "Better finish your business with him to-day if you can. We go to the country to-morrow or the day after. I've just had word that the workmen are finally out of the house; though the grounds, of course, are in bad shape, and will probably remain so. With this labor situation, it's practically impossible to get men."

Larry remembered something else. "Miss Sherwood, you recall my once speaking about a man I got to be friends with in prison — Joe Ellison?"

"Yes."

"I've written him, under an assumed name, of course, and have had an answer. He'll be out in a very few days now. He's through with his old ways. I know he'd like nothing better than a quiet place to work, off to himself somewhere. I'm sure you can trust him."

"We'll arrange to have him come out to Cedar Crest. Oh, don't think I'm being generous or sentimental," she interrupted smilingly as he started to thank her. "I'd be glad to put two or three more ex-convicts to work on our place if I could get them. And so would my friends; they can't get workmen of any kind."

That afternoon the picture dealer came. Miss Sherwood introduced Larry to him as Mr. Brandon, her cousin, and then left the two men together. Larry appraised Mr. Graham as a shrewd man who knew his business and who would like to score a triumph in his own particular field. He decided that the dealer had to be handled with a great deal of frankness, and with some stiff bluffing which must appear equally frank. The secret of Larry's earlier success had been to establish confidence and even enthusiasm in something which had little or no value. In selling an honest thing at an honest price, the first and fundamental procedure was the same, to establish confidence and, if possible, enthusiasm.

From the moment of introduction Larry quietly assumed the manner of an art collector who was very sure of himself; which manner was abetted by the setting of the Sherwood library. He felt something of the old zest when wits had been matched against wits, even though this was to be a strictly honorable enterprise.

"You know the work of Mr. Jerome Hunt?" he asked.

"I have handled practically all his work since he began to sell," replied Mr. Graham.

"I was referring to work in his recent manner."

"He has not been doing any work recently," corrected Mr. Graham.

"No?" Larry picked up the Italian mother which for this occasion he had mounted with thumb-tacks upon a drawing-board, and stood it upon a chair in the most advantageous light. "There is a little thing in Mr. Hunt's recent manner which I lately purchased."

Mr. Graham regarded the painting long and critically. Finally he remarked:

"At least it is *different*."

"Different and better," said Larry with his quiet positiveness. "So much better that I paid him three thousand dollars for it."

"Three thousand!" The dealer regarded Larry sharply. "Three thousand for that?"

"Yes. And I consider that I got a bargain."

Mr. Graham was silent for several moments. Then he said:

"For what reason have I been asked here?"

"I want you to undertake to sell this picture."

"For how much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand dollars!"

"It is easily worth five thousand," Larry said quietly.

"If you value it so highly, why do you want to sell?"

"I am pressed by the present money shortage. Also I secured a second picture when I got this one. That second picture I shall not sell. You should have no difficulty in selling this," Larry continued, "if you handle the matter right. Think of how people have started again to talk about Gaugin: about his starting to paint in a new manner down there in the Marquesas Islands, of his trading a picture for a stick of furniture or selling it for a few hundred francs — which same paintings are now each worth a small fortune. Capitalize this Gaugin talk; also the talk about poor mad Blakeslie. You've got a new sensation. One all your own."

"You can't start a sensation with one painting," Mr. Graham remarked dryly.

This had been the very remark Larry had adroitly been trying to draw from the dealer.

"Why, that's so!" he exclaimed. And then as if the thought had only that moment come to him: "Why not have an exhibition of paintings done in his new manner? He's got a studio full of things just as characteristic as this one."

Larry caught the gleam which came into the dealer's eyes. It was instantly masked.

"Too late in the spring for a picture show. Could n't put on an exhibition before next season."

"But why not have a private pre-exhibition showing?" Larry argued — "with special invitations sent to a small, carefully chosen list, putting it over strong to them that you were offering them the chance of a first and exclusive view of something very remarkable. Most of them will feel flattered and will come. And that will start talk and stir up interest in your public exhibition in the fall. That's the idea!"

Again there was the gleam, quickly masked, in the dealer's eyes. But Larry got it.

"How do I know this picture here is n't just an accident? — the only one of the sort Mr. Hunt has ever painted, or ever will paint?" cautiously inquired Mr. Graham. "You said you had a second picture. May I see it?"

Larry hesitated. But he believed he had the dealer almost "sold"; a little more and Mr. Graham would be convinced. So he brought in Maggie's portrait. The dealer looked it over with a face which he tried to keep expressionless.

"How much is this one?" he asked at length.

"It is not for sale."

"It will bring more money than the other. It's a more interesting subject."

"That's why I'm keeping it," said Larry. "I think you'll admit, Mr. Graham, that this proves that Mr. Hunt is not now painting accidents."

"You're right." The mask suddenly dropped from Mr. Graham's face; he was no longer merely an art merchant; he was also an art enthusiast. "Hunt has struck something bold and fresh, and I think I can put him over. I'll try that scheme you mentioned. Tell me where I can find him and I'll see him at once."

"That picture has got to be sold before I give you his address. No use seeing him until then; he'd laugh at you, and not listen to anything. He's sore at the world; thinks it does n't understand him. An actual sale would be the only argument that would have weight with him."

"All right — I'll buy the picture myself. Hunt and I have had a falling out, and I'd like him to have proof that I believe in him." Again Mr. Graham was the art merchant. "Though, of course, I can't pay the five thousand you ask. Hunt's new manner may catch on, and it may not. It's a big gamble."

"What will you pay?"

"What you paid for it — three thousand."

"That's an awful drop from what I expected. When can you pay it?"

"I'll send you my check by an assistant as soon as I get back to my place."

"I told you I was squeezed financially — so the picture is yours. I'll send you Mr. Hunt's present address when I receive your check. Make it payable to 'cash.'"

When Mr. Graham had gone with the Italian mother — it was then the very end of the afternoon — Larry wondered if his plan to draw Hunt out of his hermitage was going to succeed; and wondered what would be the result, if any, upon the relationship between Hunt and Miss Sherwood if Hunt should come openly back into his world an acclaimed success, and come with the changed attitude toward every one and every thing that recognition bestows.

But something was to make Larry wonder even more a few minutes later. Dick, that habitual late riser, had had to hurry away that morning without speaking to him. Now, when he came home toward six o'clock, Dick shouted cheerily from the hallway:

"Ahoy! Where you anchored, Captain Nemo?"

Larry did not answer. He sat over his papers as one frozen. He knew now whose had been the elusively familiar voice he had heard outside Maggie's door. It was Dick Sherwood's.

Dick paused without to take some messages from Judkins, and Larry's mind raced feverishly. Dick Sherwood was the victim Maggie and Barney and Old Jimmie were so cautiously and elaborately trying to trim! It seemed an impossible coincidence. But no, not impossible, after all. Their net had been spread for just such game: a young man, impressionable, pleasure-loving, with plenty of money, and with no strings tied to his spending of it. That Barney should have made his acquaintance was easily explained; to establish acquaintances with such persons as Dick was Barney's specialty. What more natural than that the high-spirited, irresponsible Dick should fall into this trap? — or indeed that he should have been picked out in advance as the ideal victim and have been drawn into it?

"Hello, there!" grumbled Dick, entering. "Why didn't you answer a shipmate's hail?"

"I heard you; but just then I was adding a column of figures, and I knew you'd look in."

At that moment Larry noted the portrait of Maggie, looking up from the chair beside him. With a swiftness which he tried to disguise into a mechanical action, he seized the painting and rolled it up, face inside.

"What's that you've got?" demanded Dick.

"Just a little daub of my own."

"So you paint, too. What else can you do? Let's have a look."

"It's too rotten. I'd rather let you see something else — though all my stuff is bad."

"You would n't do any little thing, would you, to brighten this tiredest hour in the day of a tired business man," complained Dick. "I've really been a business man to-day, Captain. Worked like the devil — or an angel — whichever works the harder."

He lit a cigarette and settled with a sigh on the corner of Larry's desk. Larry regarded him with a stranger and more contradicting mixture of feelings than he had ever thought to contain: solicitude for Dick — jealousy of him — and the instinct to protect Maggie. This last seemed to Larry grotesquely absurd the instant it seethed up in him, but there the instinct was: was Dick treating Maggie right?

"How was the show last night, Dick?"

"Punk!"

"I thought you said you were to see 'The Jest.' I've heard it's one of the best things for years."

"Oh, I guess the show's all right. But the company was poor. My company, I mean. The person I wanted to see could n't come."

"Hope you had a supper party that made up for the disappointment," pursued Larry, adroitly trying to lead him on.

"I sure had that, Captain!"

Dick slid to a chair beside Larry, dropped a hand on Larry's knee, and said in a lowered tone:

"Captain, I've recently met a new girl — and believe me, she's a knock-out!"

"Better keep clear of those show girls, Dick."

"Never again! The last one cured me for life. Miss Cameron — Maggie Cameron, how's that for a name? — is no Broadway girl, Captain. She's not even a New York girl."

"No?"

"She's from some place out West. Father owned several big ranches. She says that explains her crudeness. Her crude? I should say not! They don't grow better manners right here in New York. And she's pretty, and clever, and utterly naïve about everything in New York. Though I must say," Dick added, "that I'm not so keen about her cousin and her uncle. I'd met the cousin a few times the last year or two around town; he belongs here. The two are the sort of poor stock that crops out in every good family. They've got one merit, though: they don't try to impose on her too much."

"What is your Miss Cameron doing in New York?"

"Having her first look at the town before going to some resort for the summer; perhaps taking a cottage somewhere. I say, Captain" — leaning closer — "I wish you did n't feel you had to stick around this apartment so tight. I'd like to take you out and introduce you to her."

Larry could imagine the resulting scene if ever this innocently proposed introduction were given.

"I guess that for the present I'll have to depend upon your reports, Dick."

"Well, you can take it from me that she's just about all right!"

It was Larry's strange instinct to protect Maggie that prompted his next remark:

"You're not just out joy-riding, are you, Dick?"

Dick flushed. "Nothing of that sort. She's not that kind of girl. Besides — I think it's the real thing, Captain."

The honest look in Dick's eyes, even more than his words, quieted Larry's fear for Maggie. Presently Dick walked out leaving Larry yet another problem added to his life. He could not let anything happen to Maggie. He could not let anything happen to Dick. He had to protect each; he had to do something. Yet what could he do?

Yes, this certainly was a problem! He paced the room, another victim of the ancient predicament of divided and antagonistic duty.

CHAPTER XIX

THE night of Larry's unexpected call upon her at the Grantham, Maggie had pulled herself together and aided by the imposing Miss Grierson had done her best as ingénue hostess to her pseudo-cousin, Barney, and her pseudo-uncle, Old Jimmie, and to their quarry, Dick Sherwood, whom they were so cautiously stalking. But when Dick had gone, and when Miss Grierson had withdrawn to permit her charge a little visit with her relatives, Barney had been prompt with his dissatisfaction.

"What was the matter with you to-night, Maggie?" he demanded. "You didn't play up to your usual form."

"If you don't like the way I did it, you may get some one else," Maggie snapped back.

"Aw, don't get sore. If I'm stage-managing this show, I guess it's my business to tell you how to act the part, and to tell you when you're endangering the success of the piece by giving a poor performance."

"Maybe you'd better get some one else to take my part right now."

Maggie's tone and look were implacable. Barney moved uneasily. That was the worst about Maggie: she would n't take advice from any one unless the advice were a coincidence with or an enlargement of her own wishes, and she was particularly temperish to-night. He hastened to appease her.

"I guess the best of us have our off days. It's all right unless" — Barney hesitated, business fear and jealousy suddenly seizing him — "unless the way you acted to-night means you don't intend to go through with it."

"Why should n't I go through with it?"

"No reason. Unless you acted as you did to-night because" — again Barney hesitated; again jealousy prompted him on — "because you've heard in some way from Larry Brainard. Have you heard from Larry?"

Maggie met his gaze without flinching. She would take the necessary measures in the morning with Miss Grierson to keep that lady from indiscreet talking.

"I have not heard from Larry, and if I had, it would n't be any of your business, Barney Palmer!"

He chose to ignore the verbal slap in his face of her last phrase. "No, I guess you have n't heard from Larry. And I guess none of us will hear from him — not for a long time. He's certainly fixed himself for fair!"

"He sure has," agreed Old Jimmie.

Maggie said nothing.

"Seems to me we've got this young Sherwood hooked," said Old Jimmie, who had been impatient during this unprofitable bickering. "Seems to me it's time to settle just how we're going to get his dough. How about it, Barney?"

"Plenty of time for that, Jimmie. This is a big fish, and we've got to be absolutely sure we've got him hooked so he can't get off. We've got to play safe here; it's worth waiting for, believe me. Besides, all the while Maggie's getting practice."

"Seems to me we ought to make our clean-up quick. So that — so that —"

"See here — you think you got some other swell game you want to use Maggie in?"

Old Jimmie's shifty gaze wavered before Barney's glare.

"No. But she's my daughter, ain't she?"

"Yes. But who's running this?" Barney demanded. Thank Heavens, Old Jimmie was one person he did not have to treat like a prima donna!

"You are."

"Then shut up, and let me run it!"

"You might at least tell if you've decided how you're going to run it," persisted Old Jimmie.

"Will you shut up!" snapped Barney.

Old Jimmie said no more. And having asserted his supremacy over at least one of the two, Barney relented and condescended to talk, lounging back in his chair with that self-conscious grace which had helped make him a figure of increasing note in the gayer restaurants of New York.

It did not enter into Barney's calculations, present or for the future, to make Maggie the mistress of any man. Not that Barney was restrained by moral considerations. The thing was just bad business. Such a woman makes but comparatively little; and what is worse, if she chooses, she makes it all for herself. And Barney, in his cynical wisdom of his poor world, further knew that the average man enticed into this poor trap, after the woman has said yes, and after the first brief freshness has lost its bloom, becomes a tight-wad and there is little real money to be got from him for any one.

"It's like this: once we've got this Sherwood bird safely hooked," expanded Barney with the air of an authority, flicking off his cigarette ash with his best restaurant manner, "we can play the game a hundred ways. But the marriage proposition is the best bet, and there are two best ways of working that."

"Which d' you think we ought to use, Barney?" inquired Old Jimmie.

But Barney went on as if the older man had not asked a question. "Both ways depend upon Sherwood being crazy in love, and upon his coming across with a proposal and sticking to it. The first way, after being proposed to, Maggie must break down and confess she's married to a man she does n't love and who does n't love her. This husband would probably give her a divorce, but he's a cagy guy and is out for the coin, and if he smelled that she wanted to remarry some one with money he would demand a large price for her freedom. Maggie must further confess that she really has no money, and is therefore helpless. Then Sherwood offers to meet the terms of this brute of a husband. If Sherwood falls for this we shove in a dummy husband who takes Sherwood's dough — and a big bank roll it will be! — and that'll be the last Sherwood 'll ever see of Maggie."

Old Jimmie nodded. "When it's worked right, that always brings home the kale."

"The only question is," continued Barney, "can Maggie put that stuff over? How about it, Maggie? Think you're good enough to handle a proposition like that?"

Looking the handsome Barney straight in the eyes, Maggie for the moment thought only of his desire to manage her and of the challenge in his tone. Larry and the appeal he had made to her were forgotten, as was also Dick Sherwood.

"Anything you're good enough to think up, Barney Palmer, I guess I'm good enough to put over," she answered coolly.

And then: "What's the other way?" she asked.

"Old stuff. Have to be a sure-enough marriage. Sherwoods are big-time people, you know; a sister who's a regular somebody. After marriage, family permitted to learn truth — perhaps something much worse than truth. Family horrified. They pay Maggie a big wad for a separation — same as so many horrified families get rid of daughters-in-law they don't like. Which of the ways suits you best, Maggie?"

Maggie shrugged her shoulders with indifference. It suited her present mood to maintain her attitude of being equal to any enterprise.

"Which do you like best, Barney?" Old Jimmie asked.

"The second is safer. But then it's slower; and there would be lawyers' fees which would eat into our profits; and then because of the publicity we might have to wait some time before it would be safe to use Maggie again. The first plan is n't so complicated, it's quick, and at once we've got Maggie free to use in other operations. The first looks the best bet to me — but, as I said, we don't have to decide yet. We can let developments help make the actual decision for us."

Barney did not add that a further reason for his objecting to the second plan was that he did n't want Maggie actually tied in marriage to any man. That was a relationship his hopes were reserving for himself.

Barney's inborn desire for acknowledged chieftainship again craved assertion and pressed him on to say:

"You see, Maggie, how much depends on you. You've got a whale of a chance for a beginner. I hope you take a big brace over to-night and play up to the possibilities of your part."

"You take care of your end, and I'll take care of mine!" was her sharp retort.

Barney was flustered for a moment by his second failure to dominate Maggie. "Oh, well, we'll not row," he tried to say easily. "We understand each other, and we're each trying to help the other fellow's game — that's the main point."

The two men left, Jimmie without kissing his daughter good-night. This caused Maggie no surprise. A kiss, not the lack of it, would have been the thing that would have excited wonder in Maggie.

Barney went away well satisfied on the whole with the manner in which the affair was progressing, and with his management of it and of Maggie. Maggie was obstinate, to be sure; but he'd soon work that out of her. He was now fully convinced of the soundness of his explanation of Maggie's poor performance of that night: she had just had an off day.

As for Maggie, after they had gone she sat up long, thinking — and her thoughts reverted irresistibly to Larry. His visit had been most distracting. But she was not going to let it affect her purpose. If anything, she was more determined than ever to be what she had told him she was going to be, to prove to him that he could not influence her.

She tried to keep her mind off Larry, but she could not. He was for her so many questions. How had he escaped? — thrown off both police and old friends? Where was he now? What was he doing? And when and how was he going to reappear and interfere? — for Maggie had no doubt, now that she knew him to be in New York, that he would come again, and again try to check her.

And there was a matter which she no more understood than Larry, and this was another of her questions: Why had she gone into a panic and aided his escape?

Of course, she now and then thought of Dick Sherwood. She rather liked Dick. But thus far she regarded him exactly as her scheme of life had presented him to her: as a pleasant dupe who, in an exciting play in which she had the thrilling lead, was to be parted from his money. She was rather sorry for him; but this was business, and her sorrow was not going to interfere with what she was going to do.

Maggie Cameron, at this period of her life, was not deeply introspective. She did not realize what, according to other standards, this thing was which she was doing. She was merely functioning as she had been taught to function. And if any change was beginning in her, she was thus far wholly unconscious of it.

CHAPTER XX

LARRY'S new problem was the most difficult and delicate dilemma of his life — this divided loyalty: to balk Maggie and the two men behind her without revealing the truth about Maggie to Dick, to protect Dick without betraying Maggie. It certainly was a trying, baffling situation.

He had no such foolish idea that he could change Maggie by exposing her. At best he would merely render her incapable of continuing this particular course; he would increase her bitterness and hostility to him. Anyhow, according to the remnants of his old code, that would n't be playing fair — particularly after her aiding his escape when he had been trapped.

Upon only one point was he clear, and on this he became more settled with every hour: whatever he did he must do with the idea of a fundamental awakening in Maggie. Merely to foil her in this one scheme would be to solve the lesser part of his problem; Maggie would be left unchanged, or if changed at all the change would be toward a greater hardness, and his major problem would be made more difficult of solution.

He considered many ways. He thought of seeing Maggie again, and once more appealing to her. That he vetoed, not because of the danger to himself, but because he knew Maggie would not see him; and if he again did break in upon her unexpectedly, in her obstinate pride she would heed nothing he said. He thought of seeing Barney and Old Jimmie and somehow so throwing the fear of God into that pair that they would withdraw Maggie from the present enterprise; but even if he succeeded in so hazardous an undertaking, again Maggie would be left unchanged. He thought of showing Miss Sherwood the hidden portrait of Maggie, of telling her all and asking her aid; but this he also vetoed, for it seemed a betrayal of Maggie.

He kept going back to one plan: not a plan exactly, but the idea upon which the right plan might be based. If only he could adroitly, with his hand remaining unseen, place Maggie in a situation where circumstances would appeal conqueringly to her best self, to her latent sense of honor — that was the idea! But cudgel his brain as he would, Larry could not just then develop a working plan whose foundation was that idea.

But even if Larry had had a brilliant plan it would hardly have been possible for him to have devoted himself to its execution, for two days after his visit to Maggie at the Grantham, the Sherwoods moved out to their summer place some forty miles from the city on the North Shore of Long Island; and Larry was so occupied with routine duties pertaining to this migration that at the moment he had time for little else. Cedar Crest was individual yet typical of the better class of Long Island summer residences. It was a long white building of many piazzas and many wings, set on a bluff looking over the Sound, with a broad stretch of silken lawn, and about it gardens in their June glory, and behind the house a couple of hundred acres of scrub pine.

On the following day, according to a plan that had been worked out between Larry and Miss Sherwood, Joe Ellison appeared at Cedar Crest and was given the assistant gardener's cottage which stood apart on the bluff some three hundred yards east of the house. He was a tall, slightly bent, white-haired man, apparently once a man of physical strength and dominance of character and with the outer markings of a gentleman, but now seemingly a mere shadow of the forceful man of his prime. As a matter of fact, Joe Ellison had barely escaped that greatest of prison scourges, tuberculosis.

The roses were given over to his care. For a few brief years during the height of his prosperity he had owned a small place in New Jersey and during that period had seemingly been the country gentleman. Flowers had been his hobby; so that now he could have had no work which would have more suited him than this guardianship of the roses. For himself he desired no better thing than to spend what remained of his life in this sunlit privacy and communion with growing things.

He gripped Larry's hand when they were first alone in the little cottage. "Thanks, Larry; I'll not forget this," he said. He said little else. He did not refer to his prison life, or what had gone before it. He had never asked Larry, even while in prison together, about Larry's previous activities and associates; and he asked no questions now. Apparently it was the desire of this silent man to have the bones of his own past remain buried, and to leave undisturbed the graves of others' mistakes.

A retiring, unobtrusive figure, he settled quickly to his work. He seemed content, even happy; and at times there was a far-away, exultant look in his gray eyes.

Miss Sherwood caught this on several occasions; it puzzled her, and she spoke of it to Larry. Larry understood what lay behind Joe's bearing, and since the thing had never been told to him as a secret he retold that portion of Joe's history he had recited to the Duchess: of a child who had been brought up among honorable people, protected from the knowledge that her father was a convict — a child Joe never expected to see and did not even know how to find.

Joe Ellison became a figure that moved Miss Sherwood deeply: content to busy himself in his earthly obscurity, ever dreaming and gloating over his one great sustaining thought — that he had given his child the best chance which circumstances permitted; that he had removed himself from his child's life; that some unknown where out in the world his child was growing to maturity among clean, wholesome people; that he never expected to make himself known to his child. The situation also moved Larry profoundly whenever he looked at his old friend, merging into a kindly fellowship with the earth.

But while busy with new affairs at Cedar Crest, Larry was all the while thinking of Maggie, and particularly of his own dilemma regarding Maggie and Dick. But the right plan still refused to take form in his brain. However, one important detail occurred to him which required immediate attention. If his procedure in regard to Hunt's pictures succeeded in drawing the painter from his hermitage, nothing was more likely than that Hunt unexpectedly would happen upon Maggie in the company of Dick Sherwood. That might be a catastrophe to Larry's unformed plan; it had to be forestalled if possible. Such a matter could not be handled in a letter, with the police opening all mail coming to the Duchess's house. So once more he decided upon a secret visit to the Duchess's house. He figured that such a visit would be comparatively without risk, since the police and Barney Palmer and the gangsters Barney had put upon his trail all still believed him somewhere in the West.

Accordingly, a few nights after they had settled at Cedar Crest, he motored into New York in a roadster Miss Sherwood had placed at his disposal, and after the necessary precautions he entered Hunt's studio. The room was dismantled, and Hunt sat among his packed belongings smoking his pipe.

"Well, young fellow," growled Hunt after they had shaken hands, "you see you've driven me from my happy home."

"Then Mr. Graham has been to see you?"

"Yes. And he put up to me your suggestion about a private exhibition. And I fell for it. And I've got to go back among the people I used to know. And wear good clothes and put on a set of standardized good manners. Hell!"

"You don't like it?"

"I suppose, if the exhibition is a go, I'll like grinning at the bunch that thought I could n't paint. You bet I'll like that! You, young fellow — I suppose you're here to gloat over me and to try to collect your five thousand."

"I never gloat over doing such an easy job as that was. And I'm not here to collect my bet. As far as money is concerned, I'm here to give you some." And he handed Hunt the check made out to "cash" which Mr. Graham had sent him for the Italian mother.

"Better keep that on account of what I owe you," advised Hunt.

"I'd rather you'd hold it for me. And better still, I'd rather call the bet off in favor of a new bargain."

"What's the new proposition for swindling me?"

"You need a business nursemaid. What commission do you pay dealers?"

"Been paying those burglars forty per cent."

"That's too much for doing nothing. Here's my proposition. Give me ten per cent to act as your personal agent, and I'll guarantee that your total percentage for commissions will be less than at present, and that your prices will be doubled. Of course I can't do much while the police and others are so darned interested in me, so if you accept we'll just date the agreement from the time I'm cleared."

"You're on, son — and we'll just date the agreement from the present moment, A.D." Again Hunt gripped Larry's hand. "You're all to the good, Larry — and I'm not giving you half enough."

That provided Larry with the opening he had desired. "You can make it up to me."

"How?"

"By helping me out with a proposition of my own. To come straight to the point, it's Maggie."

"Maggie?"

"I guess you know how I feel there. She's got a wrong set of ideas, and she's fixed in them — and you know how high-spirited she is. She's out in the world now, trying to put something crooked over which she thinks is big. I know what it is. I want to stop her, and change her. That's my big aim — to change her. The only way I can at this moment stop what she is now doing is by exposing her. And mighty few people with a wrong twist are ever set right by merely being exposed."

"I guess you're right there, Larry."

"What I want is a chance to try another method on Maggie. If she's handled right I think she may turn out a very different person from what she seems to be — something that may surprise both of us."

Hunt nodded. "That was why I painted her picture. Since I first saw her I've been interested in how she was going to come out. She might become anything. But where do I fit in?"

"She's flying in high company. It occurred to me that, when you got back to your own world, you might meet her, and in your surprise you might speak to her in a manner which would be equivalent in its effect to an intentional exposure. I wanted to put you on your guard and to ask you to treat her as a stranger."

"That's promised. I won't know her."

"Don't promise till you know the rest."

"What else is there to know?"

"Who the sucker is they're trying to trim." Larry regarded the other steadily. "You know him. He's Dick Sherwood."

"Dick Sherwood!" exploded Hunt. "Are you sure about that?"

"I was with Maggie the other night when Dick came to have supper with her; he did n't see me. Besides, Dick has told me about her."

"How did they ever get hold of Dick?"

"Dick's the easiest kind of fish for two such smooth men as Barney and Old Jimmie when they've got a clever, good-looking girl as bait, and when they know how to use her. He's generous, easily impressed, thinks he is a wise man of the world and is really very gullible."

"Have they got him hooked?"

"Hard and fast. It won't be his fault if they don't land him."

The painter gazed at Larry with a hard look. Then he demanded abruptly:

"Show Miss Sherwood that picture of Maggie I painted?"

"No. I had my reasons."

"What you going to do with it?"

"Keep it, and pay you your top price for it when I've got the money."

"H'm! Told Miss Sherwood what's doing about Dick?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I thought of doing it, then I decided against it. For the same reason I just gave you — that it might lead to exposure, and that exposure would defeat my plans."

"You seem to be forgetting that your plan leaves Dick in danger. Dick deserves some consideration."

"And I'm giving it to him," argued Larry. "I'm thinking of him as much as of Maggie. Or almost as much. His sister and friends have pulled him out of a lot of scrapes. He's not a bit wiser or better for that kind of help. And it's not going to do him any good whatever to have some one step in and take care of him again. He's been a good friend to me, but he's a dear fool. I want to handle this so he'll get a jolt that will waken him up — make him take his responsibilities more seriously — make him able to take care of himself."

"Huh!" grunted Hunt. "You've certainly picked out a few man-sized jobs for yourself: to make a success of the straight life for yourself — to come out ahead of the police and your old pals — to make Maggie love the Ten Commandments — to put me across — to make Dick into a level-headed citizen. Any other little item you'd like to take on?"

Larry ignored the irony of the question. "Some of those things I'm going to do," he said confidently. "And any I see I'm going to fail in, I'll get warning to the people involved. But to come back to your promise: are you willing to give your promise now that you know all the facts?"

Hunt pulled for a long moment at his pipe. Then he said almost gruffly:

"I guess you've guessed that Isabel Sherwood is about the most important person in the world to me?"

That was the nearest Hunt had ever come to telling that he loved Miss Sherwood. Larry nodded.

"I'm in bad there already. Suppose your foot slips and everything about Dick goes wrong. What'll be my situation when she learns I've known all along and have just stood by quietly and let things happen? See what I'll be letting myself in for?"

"I do," said Larry, his spirits sinking. "And of course I can understand your decision not to give your promise."

"Who said I would n't give my promise?" demanded Hunt. "Of course I give my promise! All I said was that the weather bureau of my bad toe predicts that there's likely to be a storm because of this — and I want you to use your brain, son, I want you to use your brain!"

He upreared his big, shag-haired figure and gripped Larry's hand. "You're all right, Larry — and here's wishing you luck! Now get to hell out of here before Gavegan and Casey drop in for a cup of tea, or your old friends begin target practice with their hip artillery. I want a little quiet in which to finish my packing.

"And say, son," he added, as he pushed Larry through the door, "don't fall dead at the sight of me when you see me next, for I'm likely to be walking around inside all the finery and vanity of Fifth Avenue."

CHAPTER XXI

LARRY came down the stairway from Hunt's studio in a mood of high elation. Through Hunt's promise of coöperation he had at least made a start in his unformed plan regarding Maggie. Somehow, he'd work out and put across the rest of it.

Then Hunt's prediction of the trouble that might rise through his silence recurred to Larry. Indeed, that was a delicate situation! — containing all kinds of possible disasters for himself as well as for Hunt. He would have to be most watchful, most careful, or he would find himself entangled in worse circumstances than at present.

As he came down into the little back room, his grandmother was sitting over her interminable accounts, each of which represented a little profit to herself, some a little relief to many, some a tragedy to a few; and many of which were in code, for these represented transactions of a character which no pawnshop, particularly one reputed to be a fence, wishes ever to have understood by those presumptive busy-bodies, the police. When Larry had first entered, she had merely given him an unsurprised "good-evening" and permitted him to pass on. But now, as he told her good-night and turned to leave, she said in her thin, monotonous voice:

"Sit down for a minute, Larry. I want to talk to you."

Larry obeyed. "Yes, grandmother."

But the Duchess did not at once speak. She held her red-rimmed, unblinking eyes on him steadily. Larry waited patiently. Though she was so composed, so self-contained, Larry knew her well enough to know that what was passing in her mind was something of deep importance, at least to her.

At length she spoke. "You saw Maggie that night you hurried away from here?"

"Yes, grandmother. Have you heard from her since then? — or from Barney or Old Jimmie?"

The Duchess shook her head. "Do you mind telling me what happened that night — and what Maggie's doing?"

Larry told her of the scene in Maggie's suite at the Grantham, told of the plan in which Maggie was involved and of his own added predicament. This last the Duchess seemingly ignored.

"Just about what I supposed she was doing," she said. "And you tried again to get her to give it up?"

"Yes."

"And she refused?"

"Yes." And he added: "Refused more emphatically than before."

The Duchess studied him a long moment. Then: "You're not trying to make her give that up just because you think she's worth saving. You like her a lot, Larry?"

"I love her," Larry admitted.

"I'm sorry about that, Larry." There was real emotion in the old voice now. "I've told you that you're all I've got left. And now that you've at last started right, I want everything to go right with you. Everything! And Maggie will never help things go right with you. Your love for her can only mean misery and misfortune. You can't change her."

Larry came out with the questions he had asked himself so frequently these last days. "But why did her manner change so when she heard Barney and the others? Why did she help me escape?"

"That was because, deep down, she really loves you. That's the worst part of it: you both love each other." The Duchess slowly nodded her head. "You both love each other. If it was n't for that I would n't care what you tried to do. But I tell you again you can't change her. She's too sure of herself. She'll always try to make you go *her way* — and if you don't, you'll never get a smile from her. And because you love each other, I'm afraid you'll give in and go her way. That's what I'm afraid of. Won't you just cut her out of your life, Larry?"

It had been a prodigiously long speech for the Duchess. And Larry realized that the emotion behind it was a thousand times what showed in the thin voice of the bent, gestureless figure.

"For your sake I'm sorry, grandmother. But I can't."

"Then it's only fair to tell you, Larry," she said in a more composed tone which expressed a finality of decision, "that if there's ever anything I can do to stop this, I'll do it. For she's bad for you — what with her stiff spirit — and the ideas Old Jimmie has put into her — and the way Old Jimmie has brought her up. I'll stop things if I can."

Larry made no reply. The Duchess continued looking at him steadily for a long space. He knew she was thinking; and he was wondering what was passing through that shrewd old brain, when she remarked:

"By the way, Larry, I just remembered what you told me of that old Sing Sing friend — Joe Ellison. Have you heard from him recently?"

"He's out, and he's working where I am."

"Yes? What's he doing?"

"He's working there as a gardener."

Again she was silent a space, her sunken eyes steady with thought. Then she said:

"From the time he was twenty till he was thirty I knew Joe Ellison well — better than I've ever told you. He knew your mother when she was a girl, Larry. I wish you'd ask him to come in to see me. As soon as he can manage it."

Larry promised. His grandmother said no more about Maggie, and presently Larry bade her good-night and made his cautious way, ever on the lookout for danger, to where he had left his roadster, and thence safely out to Cedar Crest. But the Duchess sat for hours exactly as he had left her, her accounts unheeded, thinking, thinking, thinking over an utterly impossible possibility that had first presented itself faintly to her several days before. She did not see how the thing could be; and yet somehow it might be, for many a strange thing did happen in this border world where for so long she had lived. When finally she went to bed she slept little; her busy conjectures would not permit sleep. And though the next day she went about her shop seemingly as usual, she was still thinking.

That night Joe Ellison came. They met as though they had last seen each other but yesterday.

"Good-evening, Joe."

"Glad to see you, Duchess."

She held out to him a box of the best cigars, which she had bought against his coming, for she had remembered Joe Ellison's once fastidious taste regarding tobacco. He lit one, and they fell into the easy silence of old friends, taking up their friendship exactly where it had been broken off. As a matter of fact, Joe Ellison might have been her son-in-law but for her own firm attitude. He had known her daughter very much better than her words to Larry the previous evening had indicated. Not only had Joe known her while a girl down here, but much later he had learned in what convent she was going to school and there had been surreptitious love-making despite convent rules and boundaries — till the Duchess had learned what was going on. She had had a square out-and-out talk with Joe; the romance had suddenly ended; and later Larry's mother had married elsewhere. But the snuffed-out romance had made no difference in the friendship between the Duchess and Joe; each had recognized the other as square, as that word was understood in their border world.

To Joe Ellison the Duchess was changed but little since twenty-odd years ago. She had seemed old even then; though as a youth he had known old men who had talked of her beauty when a young woman and of how she had queened it among the reckless spirits of that far time. But to the Duchess the change in Joe Ellison was astounding. She had last seen him in his middle thirties: black-haired, handsome, careful of dress, powerful of physique, dominant, fiery-tempered, fearless of any living thing, but with these hot qualities checked into a surface appearance of unruffled equanimity by his self-control and his habitual reticence. And now to see him thin, white-haired, bent, his old fire seemingly burned to gray ashes — the Duchess, who had seen much in her generations, was almost appalled at the transformation.

At first the Duchess skillfully guided the talk among commonplaces.

"Larry tells me you're out with him."

"Yes," said Joe. "Larry's been a mighty good pal."

"What're you going to do when you get back your strength?"

"The same as I'm doing now — if they'll let me." And after a pause: "Perhaps later, if I had the necessary capital, I'd like to start a little nursery. Or else grow flowers for the market."

"Not going back to the old thing, then?"

Joe shook his white head. "I'm all through there. Flowers are a more interesting proposition."

"Whenever you get ready to start, Joe, you can have all the capital you want from me. And it will cost you nothing. Or if you'd rather pay, it'll cost you the same as at a bank — six per cent."

"Thanks. I'll remember." Joe Ellison could not have spoken his gratitude more strongly.

The Duchess now carefully guided the talk in the direction of the thing of which she had thought so constantly.

"By the way, Joe, Larry told me something about you I'd never heard before — that you had been married, and had a child."

"Yes. You did n't hear because I was n't telling anybody about it when it happened, and it never came out."

"Mind telling me about it, Joe?"

He pulled at his perfecto while assembling his facts; and then he made one of the longest speeches Joe Ellison — "Silent Joe" some of his friends had called him in the old days — was ever known to utter. But there was reason for its length; it was an epitome of the most important period of his life.

"I had a nice little country place over in Jersey for three or four years. It all happened there. No one knew me for what I was; they took me for what I pretended to be, a small capitalist whose interests required his taking occasional trips. Nice neighbors. That's where I met my wife. She was fine every way. That's why I kept all that part of my life from my pals; I was afraid they might leak and the truth would spoil everything. My wife was an orphan, niece of the widow of a broker who lived out there. She never knew the truth about me. She died when the baby was born. When the baby was a year and a half my big smash came, and I went up the river. But I was never connected up with the man who lived over in Jersey and who suddenly cancelled his lease and moved away."

The Duchess drew nearer to the heart of her thoughts.

"Was the baby a boy or girl, Joe?"

"Girl."

The Duchess did not so much as blink. "How old would she be by this time?"

"Eighteen."

"What was her name?"

"Mary — after her mother. But of course I ordered it to be changed. I don't know what her name is now."

The Duchess pressed closer.

"What became of her, Joe?"

A glow began to come into the somber eyes of Joe Ellison. "I told you her mother was a fine woman, and she never knew anything bad about me. I wanted my girl to grow up like her mother. I wanted her to have as good a chance as any of those nice girls over in Jersey — I wanted her never to know any of the lot I've known — I wanted her never to have the stain of knowing her father was a crook — I wanted her never to know even who her father was."

"How did you manage it?"

"Her mother had left a little fortune, about twenty-five thousand — twelve or fifteen hundred a year. I turned the money and the girl over to my best pal — and the squarest pal a man ever had — the only one I'd let know about my Jersey life. I told him what to do. She was an awfully bright little thing; at a year and a half, when I saw her last, she was already talking. She was to be brought up among nice, simple people — go to a good school — grow up to be a nice, simple girl. And especially never to know anything about me. She was to believe herself an orphan. And my pal did just as I ordered. He wrote me how she was getting on till about four years ago, then I had news that he was dead and that the trust fund had been transferred to a firm of lawyers, though I was n't given the name of the lawyers. That does n't make any difference since she's getting the money just the same."

"What was your pal's name, Joe?"

"Jimmie Carlisle."

The Duchess had been certain what this name would be, but nevertheless she could not repress a start.

"What's the matter?" Joe asked sharply. "Did you know him?"

"Not in those days," said the Duchess, recovering her even tone. "Though I got to know him later. By the way," she added casually, "did Jimmie Carlisle have any children of his own?"

"Not before I went away. He was n't even married."

There was now no slightest doubt left in the Duchess's mind. Maggie was really Joe Ellison's daughter.

Joe Ellison went on, the glow of his sunken eyes becoming yet more exalted. He was almost voicing his thoughts to himself alone, for his friendship with the Duchess was so old that her presence was no inhibition. His low words were almost identical in substance with what Larry had told — a summary of what had come to be his one great hope and dream, the nearest thing he had to a religion.

"Somewhere, in a nice place, my girl is now growing up like her mother. Clean of everything I was and I knew. She must be practically a woman now. I don't know where she is — there's now no way for me to learn. And I don't want to know. And I don't want her ever to know about me. I don't ever want to be the cause of making her feel disgraced, or of dragging her down from among the people where she belongs."

The Duchess gave no visible sign of emotion, but her ancient heart-strings were set vibrating by that tense, low-pitched voice. She had a momentary impulse to tell him the truth. But just then the Duchess was a confusion of many conflicting impulses, and the balance of their strength was for the moment against telling. So she said nothing.

Their talk drifted back to commonplaces, and presently Joe Ellison went away. The Duchess sat motionless at her desk, again thinking — thinking — thinking; and when Joe Ellison was back in his gardener's cottage at Cedar Crest and was happily asleep, she still sat where he had left her. During her generations of looking upon life from the inside, she had seen the truth of many strange situations of which the world had learned only the wildest rumors or the most respectable versions; but during the long night hours, perhaps because the affair touched her so closely, this seemed to her the strangest situation she had ever known. A father believing with the firm belief of established certainty that his daughter had been brought up free from all taint of his own life, carefully bred among the best of people. In reality the girl brought up in a criminal atmosphere, with criminal ideas implanted in her as normal ideas, and carefully trained in criminal ways and ambitions. And neither father nor daughter having a guess of the truth.

Indeed it was a strange situation! A situation charged with all kinds of unforeseeable results.

The Duchess now understood the unfatherly disregard Old Jimmie had shown for the ordinary welfare of Maggie. Not being her father, he had not cared. Superficially, at least, Jimmie Carlisle must have been a much more plausible individual twenty years earlier, to have won the implicit trust of Joe Ellison and to have become his foremost friend. She understood one reason why Old Jimmie had always boarded Maggie in the cheapest and lowest places; his hidden cupidity had thereby been pocketing about a thousand dollars a year of trust money for over sixteen years.

But there was one queer problem here to which the Duchess could not at this time see the answer. If Jimmie Carlisle had wished to gratify his cupidity and double-cross his friend, why had he not at the very start placed Maggie in an orphanage where she would have been neither charge nor cost to him, and thus have had the use of every penny of the trust fund? Why had he chosen to keep her by him, and train her carefully to be exactly what her father had most wished her not to be? There must have been some motive in the furtive, tortuous mind of Old Jimmie, that now would perhaps forever remain a mystery.

Of course she saw, or thought she saw, the reason for the report of Old Jimmie's death to Joe Ellison. That report had been sent to escape an accounting.

As she sat through the night hours the Duchess for the first time felt warmth creep over her for Maggie. She saw Maggie in the light of a victim. If Maggie had been brought up as her father had planned, she might now be much the girl her father dreamed her. But Old Jimmie had entered the scheme of things. Yes, the audacious, willful, confident Maggie, bent on conquering the world in the way Old Jimmie and later Barney Palmer had taught her, was really just a poor misguided victim who should have had a far different fate.

And now the Duchess came to one of the greatest problems of her life. What should she do? Considering the facts that Joe Ellison wished the life of a recluse and desired to avoid all talk of the old days, the chances were that he would never happen upon the real state of affairs. Only she and Old Jimmie knew the essentials of the situation — and very likely Jimmie did not yet know that the friend who had once trusted him was now a free man. She felt as though she held in her hands the strings of destiny. Should she tell the truth?

She pondered long. All her considerations were given weight according to what she saw as their possible effect upon Larry; for Larry was the one person left whom she loved, and on him were fixed the aspirations of these her final years. Therefore her thoughts and arguments were myopic, almost necessarily specious. She wanted to see justice done, of course. But most of all she wanted what was best for Larry. If she told the truth, it might result in some kind of temporary breakdown in Maggie's attitude which would bring her and Larry together. That would be disastrous. If not disastrous at once, certainly in the end. Maggie was a victim, and undoubtedly deserved sympathy. But others should not be sacrificed merely because Maggie had suffered an injury. She had been too long under the tutelage of Old Jimmie, and his teachings were now too thoroughly the fiber of her very being, for her to alter permanently. She might change temporarily under the urge of an emotional revelation; but she would surely revert to her present self. There was no doubt of that.

And the Duchess gave weight to other considerations — all human, yet all in some measure specious. Joe Ellison was happy in his dream, and would be happy in it all the rest of his life. Why tell the truth and destroy his precious illusion? — especially when there was no chance to change Maggie?

And further, she recalled the terrific temper that had lived within the composed demeanor of Joe Ellison. The fires of that temper could not yet be all burned out. If she told the truth, told that Jimmie Carlisle was still alive, that might be just touching the trigger of a devastating tragedy—might be disaster for all. What would be the use when no one would have been benefited?

And so, in the wisdom of her old head and the entanglements of her old heart, the Duchess decided she would never tell. And that loving, human decision she was to cling to through the stress of times to come.

But even while she was thus deciding upon a measure to checkmate them both, Larry was pacing his room at Cedar Crest, at last excitedly evolving the elusive plan which was to bring Maggie to her senses and also to him; and Maggie, all unconscious of this new element which had entered as a potential factor in her existence, all unconscious of how far she had been guided from the course which had been charted for her, was lying awake at the Grantham after a late party at which Dick Sherwood had been her escort, and was exulting pridefully over the seemingly near consummation of the plan that was to show Larry Brainard how wrong he was and that was to establish her as the cleverest woman in her line — better even than Barney or Old Jimmie believed her.

And thus separate wills each strove to direct their own lives and other lives according to their own separate plans; little thinking to what extent they were all entangled in a common destiny; and thinking not at all of the further seed that was being sown for the harvest-time of the whirlwind.

CHAPTER XXII

After Larry's many days and nights of futile searching of his brain for a plan that would accord with his fundamental idea for awakening the unguessed other self of Maggie, the plan, which finally came to him complete in all its details in a single moment, was so simple and obvious that he marveled it could have been plainly before his eyes all this while without his ever seeing it. Of course the plan was dangerous and of doubtful issue. It had to be so, because it involved the reactions of strong-tempered persons as yet unacquainted who would have no foreknowledge of the design behind their new relationship; and because its success or failure, which might also mean his own complete failure, the complete loss of all he had thus far gained, depended largely upon the twist of events which he could not foresee and therefore could not guide.

Briefly, his plan was so to manage as to have Maggie received in the Sherwood household as a guest, to have her receive the frank, unquestioning hospitality (and perhaps friendship) of such a gracious, highly placed, unpretentious woman as Miss Sherwood, so distinctly a native of, and not an immigrant to, the great world. To be received as a friend by those against whom she plotted, to have the generous, unsuspecting friendship of Miss Sherwood — if anything just then had a chance to open the blinded Maggie's eyes to the evil and error of what she was engaged upon, if anything had a chance to appeal to the finer things he believed to exist unrecognized or suppressed in Maggie, this was that thing.

And best part of this plan, its effect would be only within Maggie's self. No one need know that anything had happened. There would be no exposure, no humiliation.

Of course there was the great question of how to get Miss Sherwood to invite Maggie; and whether indeed Miss Sherwood would invite her at all. And there was the further question, the invitation being sent, of whether Maggie would accept.

Larry decided to manipulate his design through Dick Sherwood. Late that afternoon, when Dick, just returned from the city, dropped into, as was his before-dinner custom, the office-study which had been set aside for Larry's use, Larry, after an adroit approach to his subject, continued:

"And since I've been wished on you as a sort of step-uncle, there's something I'd like to suggest — if I don't seem to be fairly jimmying my way into your affairs."

"Door's unlocked and wide open, Captain," said Dick. "Walk right in and take the best chair."

"Thanks. Remember telling me about a young woman you recently met? A Miss Maggie — Maggie — "

"Miss Cameron," Dick prompted. "Of course I remember."

"And remember your telling me that this time it's the real thing?"

"And it *is* the real thing!"

"You have n't — excuse me — asked her to marry you yet?"

"No. I've been trying to get up my nerve."

"Here's where you've got to excuse me once more, Dick — it's not my business to tell you what should be your relations with your family — but have you told your sister?"

"No." Dick hesitated. "I suppose I should. But I had n't thought of it — yet. You see — " Again Dick hesitated.

"Yes?" prompted Larry.

"There are her relatives — that cousin and uncle. I guess it must have been my thinking of them that prevented my thinking of what you suggest."

"But you told me they had n't interfered much, and never would interfere." Larry gently pressed his point: "And look at it from Miss Cameron's angle of view. If it's the real thing, and you're behaving that way toward her, has n't she good grounds for thinking it strange that you have n't introduced her to your family?"

"By George, you're right, Captain! I'll see to that at once."

"Of course, Dick," Larry went on, carefully feeling his way, "you know much better than I the proper way to do such things — but don't you think it would be rather nice, when you tell your sister, that you suggest to her that she invite Miss Cameron out here for a little visit? If they are to meet, I know Miss Cameron, or any girl, would take it as more of a tribute to be received in your own home than merely to meet in a big commonplace hotel."

"Right again, Captain! I'd tell Isabel to-night, and ask her to send the invitation — only I'm booked to scoot right back to the city for a little party as soon as I get some things together, and I'll stay overnight in the apartment. But I'll attend to the thing to-morrow night, sure."

"May I ask just one favor in the meantime?"

"One favor? A dozen, Captain!"

"I'll take the other eleven later. Just now I only ask, since you have n't proposed, that you won't — er — commit yourself any further, in any way, with Miss Cameron until after you've told your sister and until after Miss Cameron has been out here."

"Oh, I say now!" protested Dick.

"I am merely suggesting that affairs remain *in statu quo* until after Miss Cameron's visit with your sister. That's not asking much of you, Dick — nor asking it for a very long time."

"Oh, of course I'll do it, Captain," grumbled Dick affectionately. "You've got me where I'll do almost anything you want me to do."

But Dick did not speak to his sister the following evening. The next morning news came to Miss Sherwood of a friend's illness, and she and her novel-reading aunt hurried off at once on what was to prove to be a week's absence. But this delay in his plan did not worry Larry as greatly as it otherwise would have done, for Dick repeated his promise to hold a stiff rein upon himself until after he should have spoken to his sister. And Larry believed he could rely upon Dick's pledged word.

During this week of waiting and necessary inactivity Larry concentrated upon another phase of his many-sided plan — to make of himself a business success. As has been said, he saw his chance of this in the handling of Miss Sherwood's affairs; and saw it particularly in an idea that had begun to grow upon him since he became aware, through statements and letters from the agents turned over to him, of the extent of the Sherwood real-estate holdings and since he had got some glimmering of their condition. His previous venturings about the city had engendered in him a sense of moderate security; so he now began to make flying trips into New York in the smart roadster Miss Sherwood had placed at his disposal.

On each trip Larry made swift visits to several of the properties, until finally he had covered the entire list Miss Sherwood had furnished him through the agents. His survey corroborated his surmise. The property, mostly neglected apartment and tenement houses, was in an almost equally bad way whether one regarded it from the standpoint of sanitation, comfort, or cold financial returns. The fault for this was due to the fact that the Sherwoods had left the property entirely in the care of the agents, and the agents, being old, old-fashioned, and weary of business to the point of being almost ready to retire, had left the property to itself.

Prompted by these bad conditions, and to some degree by the then critical housing famine, with its records of some thousands of families having no place at all to go and some thousands of families being compelled for the sake of mere shelter to pay two and three times what they could afford for a few poor rooms, and with its records of profiteering landlords, Larry began to make notes for a plan which he intended later to elaborate — a plan which he tentatively entitled: "Suggestions for the Development of Sherwood Real-Estate Holdings." Larry, knowing from the stubs of Miss Sherwood's checkbook what would be likely to please her, gave as much consideration to Service as to Profit. The basis of his growing plan was good apartments at fair rentals. That he saw as the greatest of public services in the present crisis. But the return upon the investment had to be a reasonable one. Larry did not believe in Charity, except for extreme cases. He believed, and his belief had grown out of a wide experience with many kinds of people, that Charity, of course to a smaller extent, was as definitely a source of social evil as the then much-talked-of Profiteering.

In the meantime he was seeing his old friend, Joe Ellison, every day; perhaps smoking with Ellison in his cottage after he had finished his day's work among the roses, perhaps walking along the bluff which hung above the Sound, whose cool, clear waters splashed with vacation laziness upon the shingle. The two men rarely spoke, and never of the past. Larry was well acquainted with, and understood, the older man's deep-rooted wish to avoid all talk bearing upon deeds and associates of other days; that was a part of his life and a phase of existence that Joe Ellison was trying to forget, and Larry by his silence deferred to his friend's desire.

On the day after Joe Ellison's visit to the Duchess, Larry had received a note from his grandmother, addressed, of course, to "Mr. Brandon." There was no danger in her writing Larry if she took adequate precautions: mail addressed to Cedar Crest was not bothered by postal and police officials; it was only mail which came to the house of the Duchess which received the attention of these gentlemen.

The note was one which the Duchess, after that night of thought which had so shaken her old heart, had decided to be a necessity if her plan of never telling of her discovery of Maggie's real paternity were to be a success. The major portion of her note dwelt upon a generality with which Larry already was acquainted: Joe's desire to keep clear of all talk touching upon the deeds and the people of his past. And then in a careless-seeming last sentence the Duchess packed the carefully calculated substance of her entire note:

"It may not be very important — but particularly avoid ever mentioning the mere name of Jimmie Carlisle. They used to know each other, and their acquaintance is about the bitterest thing Joe Ellison has to remember."

Of course he'd never mention Old Jimmie Carlisle, Larry said to himself as he destroyed the note — never guessing, in making this natural response to what seemed a most natural request, that he had become an unconscious partner in the plan of the warm-hearted, scheming Duchess.

There was one detail of Joe Ellison's behavior which aroused Larry's mild curiosity. Directly beneath one of Joe's gardens, hardly a hundred yards away, was a bit of beach and a pavilion which were used in common by the families from the surrounding estates. The girls and younger women were just home from schools and colleges, and at high tide were always on the beach. At this period, whenever he was at Cedar Crest, Larry saw Joe, his work apparently forgotten, gazing fixedly down upon the young figures splashing about the water in their bright bathing-suits or lounging about the pavilion in their smart summer frocks.

This interest made Larry wonder, though to be sure not very seriously. For he had never a guess of how deep Joe's interest was. He did not know, could not know, that that tall, fixed figure, with its one absorbing idea, was thinking of his daughter. He could not know that Joe Ellison, emotionally elated and with a hungry, self-denying affection that reached out toward them all, was seeing his daughter as just such a girl as one of these — simple, wholesome, well-brought-up. He could not know that Joe, in a way, perceived his daughter in every nice young woman he saw.

Toward evening of the seventh day of her visit, Miss Sherwood returned. Larry was on the piazza when the car bearing her swept into the white-graveled curve of the drive. The car was a handsome, powerful roadster. Larry had started out to be of such assistance as he could, when the figure at the wheel, a man, sprang from the car and helped Miss Sherwood alight. Larry saw that the man was Hunt — such a different Hunt! — and he had begun a quick retreat when Hunt's voice called after him:

"You there — wait a minute! I want a little chin-chin with you."

Larry halted. He could not help overhearing the few words that passed between Hunt and Miss Sherwood.

"Thank you ever so much," she said in her even voice. "Then you're coming?"

"I promised, did n't I?"

"Then good-bye."

"Good-bye."

They shook hands friendly enough, but rather formally, and Miss Sherwood turned to the house. Hunt called to Larry:

"Come here, son."

Larry crossed to the big painter who was standing beside the power-bulged hood of his low-swung car.

"Happened to drop in where she was — brought her home — aunt following in that hearse with its five-foot cushions she always rides in," Hunt explained. And then: "Well, I suppose you've got to give me the once-over. Hurry up, and get it done with."

Larry obeyed. Hunt's wild hair had been smartly barbered, he had on a swagger dust-coat, and beneath it flannels of the smartest cut. Further, he bore himself as if smart clothes and smart cars had always been items of his equipment.

"Well, young fellow, spill it," he commanded. "What do I look like?"

"Like Solomon in all his glory. No, more like the he-dressmaker of the Queen of Sheba."

"I'm going to run you up every telephone post we come to for that insult! Hop in, son, and we'll take a little voyage around the earth in eighty seconds."

Larry got in. Once out of the drive the car leaped away as though intent upon keeping to Hunt's time-table. But after a mile or two Hunt quieted the roaring monster to a conversational pace.

"Get one of the invitations to my show?" he asked.

"Yes. Several days ago. That dealer certainly got it up in great shape."

"You must have hypnotized Graham. That old paint pirate is giving the engine all the gas she'll stand — and believe me, he's sure getting up a lot of speed." Hunt grinned. "That private pre-exhibition show you suggested is proving the best publicity idea Graham ever had in his musty old shop. Everywhere I go, people are talking about the darned thing. Every man, woman and child, also unmarried females of both sexes, who got invitations are coming — and those who did n't get 'em are trying to bribe the traffic cop at Forty-Second Street to let 'em in."

Hunt paused for a chuckle. "And I'm having the time of my young life with the people who always thought I could n't paint, and who are now trying to sidle up to me on the suspicion that possibly after all I can paint. What's got that bunch buffaloed is the fact that Graham has let it leak out that I'm likely to make bales of money from my painting. The idea of any one making money out of painting, that's too much for their heads. Oh, this is the life, Larry!"

Larry started to congratulate him, but was instantly interrupted with:

"I admit I'm a painter, and always will admit it. But this present thing is all your doing. We'll try to square things sometime. But I did n't ask you to come along to hear verbostical acrobatics about myself. I asked you to learn if you'd worked out your plan yet regarding Maggie?"

"Yes." And Larry proceeded to give the details of his design.

"Regular psychological stuff!" exclaimed Hunt. And then: "Say, you're some stage-manager! Or rather some playwright! Playwrights that know tell me it's one of their most difficult tricks — to get all their leading characters on the stage at the same time. And here you've got it all fixed to bring on Miss Sherwood, Dick, Maggie, yourself, and the all-important me — for don't forget I shall be slipping out to Cedar Crest occasionally."

"As for myself," remarked Larry, "I shall remain very much behind the scenes. Maggie'll never see me."

"Well, here's hoping you're good enough playwright to manage your characters so they won't run away from you and mix up an ending you never dreamed of!"

The car paused again in the drive and Larry got out.

"I say, Larry," Hunt whispered eagerly, "who's that tall, white-haired man working over there among the roses?"

"Joe Ellison. He's that man I told you about my getting to know in Sing Sing. Remember?"

"Oh, yes! The crook who was having his baby brought up to be a real person. Say, he's a sure-enough character! Lordy, but I'd love to paint that face! . . . So-long, son."

The car swung around the drive and roared away. Larry mounted to the piazza. Dick was waiting for him, and excitedly drew him down to one corner that crimson ramblers had woven into a nook for confidences.

"Captain, old scout," he said in a low, happy voice, "I've just told sis. Put the whole proposition up to her, just as you told me. She took it like a regular fellow. Your whole idea was one hundred per cent right. Sis is inside now getting off that invitation to Miss Cameron, asking her to come out day after to-morrow."

Larry involuntarily caught the veranda railing. "I hope it works out — for the best," he said.

"Oh, it will — no doubt of it!" cried the exultant Dick. "And, Captain, if it does, it'll be all your doing!"

CHAPTER XXIII

When Miss Sherwood's invitation reached Maggie, Barney and Old Jimmie were with her. The pair had growled a lot, though not directly at Maggie, at the seeming lack of progress Maggie had made during the past week. Barney was a firm enough believer in his rogue's creed of first getting your fish securely hooked; but, on the other hand, there was the danger, if the hooked fish be allowed to remain too long in the water, that it would disastrously shake itself free of the barb and swim away. That was what Barney was afraid had been happening with Dick

Sherwood. Therefore he was thinking of returning to his abandoned scheme of selling stock to Dick. He might get Dick's money in that way, though of course not so much money, and of course not so safely.

And another item which for some time had not been pleasing Barney was that Larry Brainard had not yet been finally taken care of, either by the police or by that unofficial force to which he had given orders. So he had good reason for permitting himself the relaxation of scowling when he was not on public exhibition.

But when Maggie, after reading the invitation, tossed it, together with a note from Dick, across to Barney without comment, the color of his entire world changed for that favorite son of Broadway. The surly gloom of the end of a profitless enterprise became magically an aurora borealis of superior hopes: — no, something infinitely more substantial than any heaven-painting flare of iridescent colors.

"Maggie, it's the real thing! At last!" he cried.

"What is it?" asked Old Jimmie.

Barney gave him the letter. Jimmie read it through, then handed it back, slowly shaking his head.

"I don't see nothing to get excited about," said the ever-doubtful, ever-hesitant Jimmie. "It's only an invitation."

"Aw, hell!" ejaculated the exasperated Barney in disgust. "If some one handed you a government bond all you could see would be a cigar coupon! That invitation, together with this note from Dick Sherwood saying he'll call and take Maggie out, means that the fish is all ready to be landed. Try to come back to life, Jimmie. If you knew anything at all about big-league society, you'd know that sending invitations to meet the family — that's the way these swells do things when they're all set to do business. We're all ready for the killing — the big clean-up!"

He turned to Maggie. "Great stuff, Maggie. I knew you could put it over. Of course you're going?"

"Of course," replied Maggie with a composure which was wholly of her manner.

A sudden doubt came out of this glory to becloud Barney's master mind. "I don't know," he said slowly. "It's one proposition to make one of these men swells believe that a woman is the real thing. And it's another proposition to put it over on one of these women swells. They've got eyes for every little detail, and they know the difference between the genuine article and an imitation. I've heard a lot about this Miss Sherwood; they say she's one of the cleverest of the swells. Think you can walk into her house and put it over on her, Maggie?"

"Of course — why not?" answered Maggie, again with that composure which was prompted by her pride's desire to make Barney, and every one else, believe her equal to any situation.

Barney's animation returned. "All right. If you think you can swing it, you can swing it, and the job's the same as finished and we're made!"

Left to herself, and the imposing propriety and magnificent stupidity of Miss Grierson, Maggie made no attempt to keep up her appearance of confidence. All her thoughts were upon this opportunity which insisted upon looking to her like a menace. She tried to whip her self-confidence, of which she was so proud, into a condition of constant regnancy. But the plain fact was that Maggie, the misguided child of a stolen birthright, whose soaring spirit was striving so hard to live up to the traditions and conventions of cynicism, whose young ambition it was to outshine and surpass all possible competitors in this world in which she had been placed, who in her pride believed she knew so much of life — the plain fact was that Maggie was in a state bordering on funk.

This invitation from Miss Sherwood was an ordeal she had never counted on. She had watched the fine ladies at the millinery shop and while selling cigarettes at the Ritzmore, when she had been modeling her manners, and had believed herself just as fine a lady as they. But that had been in the abstract. Now she was face to face with a situation that was painfully concrete — a real test: she had to place herself into close contrast with, and under the close observation of, a real lady, and in that lady's own home. And in all her life she had not once been in a fine home! In fine hotels, yes — but fine hotels were the common refuge of butcher, baker, floor-walker, thief, swell, and each had approximately the same attention; and all she now felt she had really learned were a few such matters as the use of table silver and finger bowls.

It came to her that Barney, in his moment of doubt, had spoken more soundly than he had imagined when he had said that it was easier to fool a man about a woman than it was to fool a woman. How tragically true that was! While trying to learn to be a lady by working in smart shops, she had learned that the occasional man who had ventured in after woman's gear was hopelessly ignorant and bought whatever was skillfully thrust upon him, but that it was impossible to slip an inferior or unsuitable or out-dated article over on the woman who really knew.

And Miss Sherwood was the kind of woman who really knew! Who knew everything. Could she possibly, possibly pass herself off on Miss Sherwood as the genuine article? . . .

Could Larry have foreseen the very real misery — for any doubt of her own qualities, any fear of her ability to carry herself well in any situation, are among the most acute of a proud woman's miseries — which for some twenty-four hours was brought upon Maggie by the well-meant intrigue of which he was pulling the hidden strings, he might, because of his love for Maggie, have discarded his design even while he was creating it, and have sought a measure pregnant with less distress. But perhaps it was just as well that Larry did not know. Perhaps, even, it was just as well that he did not know what his grandmother knew.

Maggie's pride would not let her evade the risk; and her instinct for self-preservation dictated that she should reduce the risk to its minimum. So she wrote her acceptance — Miss Grierson attended to the phrasing of her note — but expressed her regret that she would be able to come only for the tea-hour. Drinking tea must be much the same, reasoned Maggie, whether it be drunk in a smart hotel or in a smart country home.

Maggie's native shrewdness suggested her simplest summer gown as likely to have committed the fewest errors, and the invaluable stupidity of Miss Grierson aided her toward correctness if not originality. When Dick came he was delighted with her appearance. On the way out he was ebulliently excited in his talk. Maggie averaged a fair degree of sensibility in her responses, though only her ears heard him. She was far more excited than he, and every moment her excitement mounted, for every moment she was speeding nearer the greatest ordeal of her life.

When at length they curved through the lawns of satin smoothness and Dick slowed down the car before the long white house, splendid in its simplicity, Maggie's excitement had added unto it a palpitant, chilling awe. And unto this was added consternation when, as they mounted the steps, Miss Sherwood smilingly crossed the piazza and welcomed her without waiting for an introduction. Maggie mumbled some reply; she later could not remember what it was. Indeed she never had met such a woman: so finished, so gracious, so unaffected, with a sparkle of humor in her brown eyes; and the rich plainness of her white linen frock made Maggie conscious that her own supposed simplicity was cheap and ostentatious. If Miss Sherwood had received her with hostility, doubt, or even chilled civility, the situation would have been easier; the aroused Maggie would then have made use of her own great endowment of hauteur and self-esteem. But to be received with this frank cordiality, on a basis of equality with this finished woman — that left Maggie for the moment without arms. She had, in her high moments, believed herself an adventuress whose poise and plans nothing could unbalance. Now she found herself suddenly just a young girl of eighteen who did n't know what to do.

Had Maggie but known it that sudden unconscious confusion, which seemed to betray her, was really more effective for her purpose than would have been the best of conscious acting. It established her at once as an unstagey *ingénue* — simple, unspoiled, unacquainted with the formulas and formalities of the world.

Miss Sherwood, in her easy possession of the situation, banished Dick with "Run away for a while, Dick, and give us two women a chance to get acquainted." She had caught Maggie's embarrassment, and led her to a corner of the veranda which looked down upon the gardens and the glistering Sound. She spoke of the impersonal beauties spread before their vision, until she judged that Maggie's first flutter had abated; then she led the way to wicker chairs beside a table where obviously tea was to be spread.

Miss Sherwood accepted Maggie for exactly what she seemed to be; and presently she was saying in a low voice, with her smiling, unoffending directness:

"Excuse the liberty of an older woman, Miss Cameron — but I don't wonder that Dick likes you. You see, he's told me."

If Maggie had been at loss for her cue before, she had it now. It was unpretentiousness.

"But, Miss Sherwood — I'm so crude," she faltered, acting her best. "Out West I never had any chances to learn. Not any chances like your Eastern girls."

"That's no difference, my dear. You are a nice, simple girl — that's what counts!"

"Thank you," said Maggie.

"So few of our rich girls of the East know what it is to be simple," continued Miss Sherwood. "Too many are all affectation, and pose, and forwardness. At twenty they know all there is to be known, they are blasées — cynical — ready for divorce before they are ready for marriage. By contrast you are so wholesome, so refreshing."

"Thank you," Maggie again murmured.

And as the two women sat there, sprung from the extremes of life, but for the moment on the level of equals, and as the older talked on, there grew up in Maggie two violently contradictory emotions. One was triumph. She had won out here, just as she had said she would win out; and won out with what Barney had declared to be the most difficult person to get the better of, a finished woman of the world. Indeed, that was triumph!

The other emotion she did not understand so well. And just then she could not analyze it. It was an unexpected dismay — a vague but permeating sickness — a dazed sense that she was being carried by unfamiliar forces toward she knew not what.

She held fast to her sense of triumph. That was the more apprehendable and positive; triumph was what she had set forth to win. This sense of triumph was at its highest, and she was resting in its elating security, when a car stopped before the house and a large man got out and started up the steps. From the first moment there was something familiar to Maggie in his carriage, but not till Miss Sherwood, who had risen and crossed toward him, greeted him as "Mr. Hunt," did Maggie recognize the well-dressed visitor as the shabby, boisterous painter whom she had last seen down at the Duchess's.

Panic seized upon her. Miss Sherwood was leading him toward where she sat and his first clear sight of her would mean the end. There was no possible escape; she could only await her fate. And when she was denounced as a fraud, and her glittering victory was gone, she could only take herself away with as much of the defiance of admitted defeat as she could assume — and that would n't be much.

She gazed up at Hunt, whitely, awaiting extermination. Miss Sherwood's voice came to her from an infinite distance, introducing them. Hunt bowed, with a formally polite smile, and said formally, "I'm very glad to meet you, Miss Cameron."

Not till he and Miss Sherwood were seated and chatting did Maggie realize the fullness of the astounding fact that he had not recognized her. This was far more upsetting to her than would have been recognition and exposure; she had been all braced for that, but not for what had actually happened. She was certain he must have known her; nothing had really changed about her except her dress, and only a few weeks had passed since he had been seeing her daily down at the Duchess's, and since she had been his model, and he had studied every line and expression of her face with those sharp painter's eyes of his.

And so as the two chatted, she putting in a stumbling phrase when they turned to her, Maggie Carlisle, Maggie Cameron, Maggie Ellison, that gallant and all-confident adventuress who till the present had never admitted herself seriously disturbed by a problem, sat limply in her chair, a very young girl, indeed, and wondered how this thing could possibly be.

CHAPTER XXIV

PRESENTLY Miss Sherwood said something about tea, excused herself, and disappeared within the house. Maggie saw that Hunt watched Miss Sherwood till she was safely within doors; then she was aware that he was gazing steadily at her; then she saw him execute a slow, solemn wink.

Maggie almost sprang from her chair.

"Shall we take a little stroll, Miss Cameron?" Hunt asked. "I think it will be some time before Miss Sherwood will want us for tea."

"Yes — thank you," Maggie stammered.

Hunt led her down a walk of white gravel to where a circle of Hiawatha roses were trained into a graceful mosque, now daintily glorious with its solid covering of yellow-hearted red blooms. Within this retreat was a rustic bench, and on this Hunt seated her and took a place beside her. He looked her over with the cool, direct, studious eyes which reminded her of his gaze when he had been painting her.

"Well, Maggie," he finally commented, "you certainly look the part you picked out for yourself, and you seem to be putting it over. Always had an idea you could handle something big if you went after it. How d'you like the life, being a swell lady crook?"

She had hardly heard his banter. She needed to ask him no questions about his presence here; his ease of bearing had conveyed to her unconsciously from the first instant that her previous half-contemptuous estimate of him had been altogether wrong and that he was now in his natural element. Her first question went straight to the cause of her amazement.

"Did n't you recognize me when you first saw me with Miss Sherwood?"

"Yes."

"Were n't you surprised?"

"Nope," he answered with deliberate monosyllabicness.

"Why not?"

"I'd been wised up that I'd be likely to meet you — and here."

"Here! By whom?"

"By advice of counsel I must decline to answer."

"Why did n't you tell Miss Sherwood who I am and show me up?"

"Because I'd been requested not to tell."

"Requested by whom?"

"Maggie," he drawled, "you seem to be making a go of this lady crook business — but I think you might have been even more of a shining light as a criminal cross-examiner. However, I refuse to be cross-examined further. By the way," he drawled on, "how goes it with those dear souls, Barney and Old Jimmie?"

She ignored his question.

"Please! Who asked you not to tell?"

There was a sudden glint of good-humored malice in his eyes. "Mind if I smoke?"

"No."

He drew out a silver cigarette case and opened it. "Empty!" he exclaimed. "Excuse me while I get something from the house to smoke. I'll be right back."

Without waiting for her permission he stepped out of the arbor and she heard his footsteps crunching up the gravel path. Maggie waited his return in pulsing suspense. Her situation had been developing beyond anything she had ever dreamed of; she was aquiver as to what might happen next. So absorbed was she in her chaos of feeling and thoughts that she did not even hear the humble symphony of the hundreds of bees drawing their treasure from the golden hearts of the roses; and did not see, across the path a score of yards away, the tall figure of Joe Ellison among the rosebushes, pruning-shears in hand, with which he had been cutting out dead blossoms, gazing at her with that hungry, admiring, speculative look with which he had regarded the young women upon the beach.

Presently she heard Hunt's footsteps coming down the path. Then she detected a second pair. Dick accompanying him, she thought. And then Hunt appeared before her, and was saying in his big voice: "Miss Cameron, permit me to present my friend, Mr. Brandon." And then he added in a lowered voice, grinning with the impish delight of an overgrown boy who is playing a trick: "Thought I'd better go through the motions of introducing you people, so it would look as if you'd just met for the first time." And with that he was gone.

Maggie had risen galvanically. For the moment she could only stare. Then she got out his name.

"Larry!" she whispered. "You here?"

"Yes."

Astounded as she was, she had caught instantly the total lack of amazement on Larry's part.

"You're — you're not surprised to see me?"

"No," he said evenly. "I knew you were here. And before that I knew you were coming."

That was almost too much for Maggie. Hunt had known and Larry had known; both were people belonging to her old life, both the last people she expected to meet in such circumstances. She could only stare at him — entirely taken aback by this meeting.

And indeed it was a strangely different meeting from the last time she had seen him, at the Grantham; strangely different from those earlier meetings down at the Duchess's when both had been grubs as yet unmetamorphosized. Now standing in the arbor they looked a pair of weekend guests, in keeping with the place. For, as Maggie had noted, Larry in his well-cut flannels was as greatly transformed as Hunt.

It was Larry who ended the silence. "Shall we sit down?"

She mechanically sank to the bench, still staring at him.

"What are you doing here?" she managed to breathe.

"I belong here."

"Belong here?"

"I work here," he explained. "I'm called 'Mr. Brandon,' but Miss Sherwood knows exactly who I am and what I've been."

"How long have you been here?"

"Since that night when Barney and Old Jimmie took you away to begin your new career — the same night that I ran away from those gunmen who thought I was a squealer, and from Casey and Gavegan."

"And all the while that Barney and my father and the police have thought you hiding some place in the West, you've been with the Sherwoods?"

"Yes. And I've got to remain in hiding until something happens that will clear me. If the police or Barney and his friends learn where I am — you can guess what will happen."

She nodded.

"Hunt got me here," he went on to explain. "I'm assisting in trying to get the Sherwood business affairs in better shape. I might as well tell you, Maggie," he added quietly, "that Dick Sherwood is my very good friend."

"Dick Sherwood!" she breathed.

"And I might as well tell you," he went on, "that since that night at the Grantham when I heard his voice, I've known that Dick is the sucker you and Barney and Old Jimmie are trying to trim."

She half rose, and her voice sounded sharply: "Then you've got me caught in a trap! You've told them about me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Not so loud, or we may attract attention," he warned her. "I have n't told because you had your chance to give me away to Barney that night at the Grantham. And you did n't give me away."

She sank slowly back to the bench. "Is that your only reason?"

"No," he answered truthfully. "Exposing you would merely mean that you'd feel harder toward me — and harder toward every one else. I don't want that."

She pondered this a moment. "Then — you're not going to tell?"

He shook his head. "I don't expect to. I want you to be free to decide what you're going to do — though I hope you'll decide not to go through with this thing you're doing."

She made no response. Larry had spoken with control until now, but his next words burst from him.

"Don't you see what a situation it's put me in, Maggie — trying to play square with my friends, the Sherwoods, and trying to play square with you?"

Again she did not answer.

"Maggie, you're too good for what you're doing — it's all a terrible mistake!" he cried passionately. Then he remembered himself, and spoke with more composure. "Oh, I know there's not much use in talking to you now — while you feel as you do about yourself — and while you feel as you do about me. But you know I love you, and want to marry you — when — " He halted.

"When?" she prompted, almost involuntarily.

"When you see things differently — and when I can go around the world a free man, not a fugitive from Barney and his gunmen and the police."

Again Maggie was silent for a moment. It was as if she were trying to press out of her mind what he had said about loving her. Truly this was, indeed, different from their previous meetings. Before, there had almost invariably been a defiant attitude, a dispute, a quarrel. Now she had no desire to quarrel.

Finally she said with an effort to be that self-controlled person which she had established as her model:

"You seem to have your chance here to put over what you boasted to me about. You remember making good in a straight way."

"Yes. And I shall make good — if only they will let me alone." He paused an instant. "But I have no illusions about the present," he went on quietly. "I'm in quiet water for a time; I've got a period of safety; and I'm using this chance to put in some hard work. But presently the police and Barney and the others will learn where I am. Then I'll have all that fight over again — only the next time it'll be harder."

She was startled into a show of interest. "You think that's really going to happen?"

"It's bound to. There's no escaping it. If for no other reason, I myself won't be able to stand being penned up indefinitely. Something will happen, I don't know what, which will pull me out into the open world — and then for me the deluge!"

He made this prediction grimly. He was not a fatalist, but it had been borne in upon him recently that this thing was inescapable. As for him, when that time came, he was going to put up the best fight that was in him.

He caught the strained look which had come into Maggie's face, and it prompted him suddenly to lean toward her and say:

"Maggie, do you still think I'm a stool and a squealer?"

"I — "

She broke off. She had a surging impulse to go on and say something to Larry. A great deal. She was not conscious of what that great deal was. She was conscious only of the impulse. There was too great a turmoil within her, begotten by the strain of her visit on Miss Sherwood and these unexpected meetings, for any motive, impulse, or decision to emerge to even a brief supremacy. And so, during this period when her brain would not operate, she let herself be swept on by the momentum of the forces which had previously determined her direction — her pride, her self-confidence, her ambition, the alliance of fortune between her and Barney and Old Jimmie.

They were sitting in this silence when footsteps again sounded on the gravel, and a shadow blotted the arbor floor.

"Excuse me, Larry," said a man's voice.

"Sure. What is it, Joe?"

Before her Maggie saw the tall, thin man in overalls, his removed broad-brimmed hat revealing his white hair, whom she had noticed a little earlier working among the flowers. He held a bunch of the choicest pickings from the abundant rose gardens, their stems bound in maple leaves as temporary protection against their thorns. He was gazing at Maggie, respectful, hungry admiration in his somber eyes.

"I thought perhaps the young lady might care for these." He held out the roses to her. And then quickly, to forestall refusal: "I cut out more than we can use for the house. And I'd like to have you have them."

"Thank you," and Maggie took the flowers.

For an instant their eyes held. In every outward circumstance the event was a commonplace — this meeting of father and daughter, not knowing each other. It was hardly more than a commonplace to Maggie: just a tall, white-haired gardener respectfully offering her roses. And it was hardly more to Joe Ellison: just a tribute evoked by his hungry interest in every well-seeming girl of the approximate age of his daughter.

At the moment's end Joe Ellison had bowed and started back for his flower beds. "Who is that man?" asked Maggie, gazing after him. "I never saw such eyes."

"We used to be pals in Sing Sing," Larry replied. He went on to give briefly some of the details of Joe Ellison's story, never dreaming how he and Maggie were entangled in that story, nor how they were to be involved in its untanglement. Perhaps they were fortunate in this ignorance. Within the boundaries of what they did know life already held enough of problems and complications.

Larry had just finished his condensed history when Dick Sherwood appeared and ordered them to the veranda for tea. There were just the five of them, Miss Sherwood, Maggie, Hunt, Dick, and Larry. Miss Sherwood was as gracious as before, and she seemingly took Maggie's strained manner and occasional confusions as further proof of her genuineness. Dick beamed at the impression she was making upon his sister.

As for Maggie, she was living through the climax of that afternoon's strain. And she dared not show it. She forced herself to do her best acting, sipping her tea with a steady hand. And what made her situation harder was that two of the party, Larry and Hunt, were treating her with the charmed deference they might accord a charming stranger, when a word from either of them might destroy the fragile edifice of her deception.

At last it was over, and all was ready for her to start back to town with Dick. When Miss Sherwood kissed her and warmly begged her to come again soon, the very last of her control seemed to be slipping from her — but she held on. Larry and Hunt she managed to say goodbye to in the manner of her new acquaintanceship.

"Is n't she simply splendid!" exclaimed Miss Sherwood when Dick had stepped into the car and the two had started away.

Larry pretended not to have heard. He felt precariously guilty toward this woman who had befriended him. The next instant he had forgotten Miss Sherwood and his pulsing thoughts were all on Maggie in that speeding car. She had been profoundly shaken by that afternoon's experience, this much he knew. But what was going to be the real effect upon her of his carefully thought-out design? Was it going to be such as to save her and Dick? — and eventually win her for himself?

In the presence of Miss Sherwood Larry tried to behave as if nothing had happened more than the pleasant interruption of an informal tea: but beneath that calm all his senses were waiting breathless, so to speak, for news of what had happened within Maggie, and what might be happening to her.

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN Maggie sped away from Cedar Crest in the low seat of the roadster beside the happy Dick, she felt herself more of a criminal than at any time in her life, and a criminal that miraculously was making her escape out of an inescapable set of circumstances.

Beyond her relief at this escape she did not know these first few minutes what she thought or felt. Too much had happened, and what had happened had all turned out so differently from what she had expected, for her to set in orderly array this chaos of reactions within herself and read the meaning of that afternoon's visit. She managed, with a great effort, to keep under control the outer extremities of her senses, and thus respond with the correct "yes" or "no" or "indeed" when some response from her was required by Dick's happy conversation.

Near Roslyn they swung off the turnpike into an unfrequented, shady road. Dick steered to one side beneath a locust-tree and silenced the motor.

"Why are you stopping?" she asked in sudden alarm.

"So we can talk without a piece of impertinent machinery roaring interruptions at us," replied Dick with forced lightness. And then in a voice he could not make light: "I want to talk to you about — about my sister. Is n't she splendid?"

"She is!" There was no wavering of her thoughts as Maggie emphatically said this.

"I'm mighty glad you like her. She certainly liked you. She's all the family I've got, and since you two hit it off so well together I hope — I hope, Maggie — "

And then Dick plunged into it, stammeringly, but earnestly. He told her how much he loved her, in old phrases that his boyish ardor made vibrantly new. He loved her! And if she would marry him, her influence would make him take the brace all his friends had urged upon him. She'd make him a man! And she could see how pleased it would make his sister. And he would do his best to make Maggie happy — his very best!

The young super-adventuress — she herself had mentally used the word "adventuress" in thinking of herself, as being more genteel and mentally aristocratic than the cruder words by which Barney and Old Jimmie and their kind designated a woman accomplice — this young super-adventuress, who had schemed all this so adroitly, and worked toward it with the best of her brain and her conscious charm, was seized with new panic as she listened to the eager torrent of his imploring words, as she gazed into the quivering earnestness of his frank, blue-eyed face. She wished she could get out of the machine and run away or sink through the floor-boards of the car. For she really liked Dick.

"I'm — I'm not so good as you think," she whispered.

And then some unsuspected force within her impelled her to say: "Dick, if you knew the truth — "

He caught her shoulders. "I know all the truth about you I want to know! You're wonderful, and I love you! Will you marry me? Answer that. That's all I want to know!"

He had checked the confession that impulsively had surged toward her lips. Silent, her eyes wide, her breath coming sharply, she sat gazing at him. . . . And then from out the portion of her brain where were stored her purposes, and the momentum of her pride and determination, there flashed the realization that she had won! The thing that Barney and Old Jimmie had prepared and she had so skillfully worked toward, was at last achieved! She had only to say "yes," and either of those two plans which Barney had outlined could at once be put in operation — and there could be no doubt of the swift success of either. Dick's eager, trusting face was guarantee that there would come no obstruction from him.

She felt that in some strange way she had been caught in a trap. Yes, what they had worked for, they had won! And yet, in this moment of winning, as elements of her vast dizziness, Maggie felt sick and ashamed — felt a frenzied desire to run away from the whole affair. For Maggie, cynical, all-confident, and eighteen, was proving really a very poor adventuress.

"Please, Maggie" — his imploring voice broke in upon her — "won't you answer me? You like me, don't you? — you'll marry me, won't you?"

"I like you, Dick," she choked out — and it was some slight comfort to her to be telling this much of the truth — "but — but I can't marry you."

"Maggie!" It was a cry of surprised pain, and the pain in his voice shot acutely into her. "From the way you acted toward me — I thought — I hoped — " He sharply halted the accusation which had risen to his lips. "I'm not going to take that answer as final, Maggie," he said doggedly. "I'm going to give you more time to think it over — more time for me to try. Then I'll ask you again."

That which prompted Maggie's response was a mixture of impulses: the desire, and this offered opportunity, to escape; and a faint reassertion of the momentum of her purpose. For with one such as Maggie, the set purposes may be seemingly overwhelmed, but death comes hard.

"All right," she breathed rapidly. "Only please get me back as quickly as you can. I'm to have dinner with my — my cousin, and I'll be very late."

Dick drove her into the city in almost unbroken silence and left her at the great doors of the Grantham, abustle with a dozen lackeys in purple livery. She stood a moment and watched him drive away. He really was a nice boy — Dick.

As she shot up the elevator, she thought of a hitherto forgotten element of that afternoon's bewildering situation. Barney Palmer! And Barney was, she knew, now up in her sitting-room, impatiently waiting for her report of what he had good reason to believe would prove a successful experience. If she told the truth — that Dick had proposed, just as they had planned for him to do — and she had refused him — why, Barney —!

She seemed caught on every side!

Maggie got into her suite by way of her bedroom. She wanted time to gather her wits for meeting Barney. When Miss Grierson told her that her cousin was still waiting to take her to dinner, she requested her companion to inform Barney that she would be in as soon as she had dressed. She wasted all the time she legitimately could in changing into a dinner-gown, and when at length she stepped into her sitting-room she was to Barney's eye the same cool Maggie as always.

Barney rose as she entered. He was in smart dinner jacket; these days Barney was wearing the smartest of everything that money could secure. There was a shadow of impatience on his face, but it was instantly dissipated by Maggie's self-composed, direct-eyed beauty.

"How'd you come out with Miss Sherwood?" he whispered eagerly.

"Well enough for her to kiss me good-bye, and beg me to come again."

"I've got to hand it to you, Maggie! You're sure some swell actress — you've sure got class!" His dark eyes gleamed on her with half a dozen pleasures: admiration of what she was in herself — admiration of what she had just achieved — anticipation of results, many results — anticipation of what she was later to mean to him in a personal way. "If you can put it over on a swell like Miss Sherwood, you can put it over on any one!" He exulted. "As soon as we clean up this job in hand, we'll move on to one big thing after another!"

And then out came the question Maggie had been bracing herself for: "How about Dick Sherwood? Did he finally come across with that proposal?"

"No," Maggie answered steadily.

"No? Why not?" exclaimed Barney sharply. "I thought that was all that was holding him back — waiting for his sister to look you over and give you her O.K.?"

Maggie had decided that her air of cool, indifferent certainty was the best manner to use in this situation with Barney. So she shrugged her white shoulders.

"How can I tell what makes a man do something, and what makes him not do it?"

"But did he seem any less interested in you than before?" Barney pursued.

"No," replied Maggie.

"Then maybe he's just waiting to get up his nerve.

He'll ask you, all right; nothing there for us to worry about. Come on, let's have dinner. I'm starved."

On the roof of the Grantham they were excellently served; for Barney knew how to order a dinner, and he knew the art, which is an alchemistic mixture of suave diplomacy and the insinuated power and purpose of murder, of handling head-waiters and their sub-autocrats. Having no other business in hand, Barney devoted himself to that business which ran like a core through all his businesses — paying court to Maggie. And when Barney wished to be a courtier, there were few of his class who could give a better superficial interpretation of the rôle; and in this particular instance he was at the advantage of being in earnest. He forced the most expensive tidbits announced by the dinner card upon Maggie; he gallantly and very gracefully put on and removed, as required by circumstances, the green cobweb of a scarf Maggie had brought to the roof as protection against the elements; and when he took the dancing-floor with her, he swung her about and hopped up and down and stepped in and out with all the skill of a master of the modern perversion of dancing. Barney was really good enough to have been a professional dancer had his desires not led him toward what seemed to him a more exciting and more profitable career.

Maggie, not to rouse Barney's suspicions, played her rôle as well as he did his own. And most of the other diners, a fraction of the changing two or three hundred thousand people from the South and West who choose New York as the best of all summer resorts, gazed upon this handsome couple with their intricate steps which were timed with such effortless and enviable accuracy, and excitedly believed that they were beholding two distinguished specimens of what their home papers persisted in calling New York's Four Hundred.

Maggie got back to her room with the feeling that she had staved off Barney and her numerous other dilemmas for the immediate present. Her chief thought in the many events of the day had been only to escape her dangers and difficulties for the moment; all the time she had known that her real thinking, her real decisions, were for a later time when she was not so driven by the press of unexpected circumstances. That less stressful time was now beginning.

What was she to do next? What were to be her final decisions? And what, in all this strange ferment, was likely to germinate as possible forces against her?

She mulled these things over for several days, during which Dick came to see her twice, and twice proposed, and was twice put off. She had quiet now, and was most of the time alone, but that clarity which she had expected, that quickness and surety of purpose which she had always believed to be unfailingly hers, refused to come.

She tried to have it otherwise, but the outstanding figure in her meditations was Larry. Larry, who had not exposed her at the Sherwoods', and whose influence had caused Hunt also not to expose her — Larry, who without deception was on a familiar footing at the Sherwoods' where she had been received only through trickery — Larry, a fugitive in danger from so many enemies, perhaps after all undeserved enemies — Larry, who looked to be making good on his boast to achieve success through honesty — Larry, who had again told her that he loved her. She liked Dick Sherwood — she really did. But Larry — that was something different.

And thus she thought on, drawn this way and that, and unable to reach a decision. But with most people, when in a state of acute mental turmoil, that which has been most definite in the past, instinct, habit of mind, purpose, tradition, becomes at least temporarily the dominant factor through the mere circumstance that it has existed powerfully before, through its comparative stability, through its semi-permanence. And so with Maggie. She had for that one afternoon almost been won over against herself by the workings of Larry's secret diplomacy. Then had come the natural reaction. And now in her turmoil, in so far as she had any decision, it was instinctively to go right ahead in the direction in which she had been going.

But on the sixth day of her uncertainty, just after Dick had called on her and she had provisionally accepted an invitation to Cedar Crest for the following afternoon, a danger which she had half seen from the start burst upon her without a moment's warning. It came into her sitting-room, just before her dinner hour, in the dual form of Barney and Old Jimmie. The faces of both were lowering.

"Get rid of that boob chaperon of yours!" gritted Barney. "We're going to have some real talk!"

Maggie stepped to the connecting door, sent Miss Grierson on an inconsequential errand, and returned.

"You're looking as pleasant as if you were sitting for a new photograph, Barney. What gives you that sweet expression?"

"You'll cut out your comic-supplement stuff in just one second," Barney warned her. "We both saw young Sherwood awhile ago as he was leaving the Grantham, and he told us *everything!*"

Persiflage did indeed fail Maggie. "Everything?" she exclaimed. "What's everything?"

"He told us about proposing to you almost a week ago, and about your refusing him. And you lied to us — kept us sitting round, wasting our time — and all the while you've been double-crossing us!"

Those visitors from South and West, especially the women, who a few nights before on the roof had regarded Barney as the perfect courtier, would not have so esteemed him if they had seen him at the present moment. He seized Maggie's wrists, and all the evil of his violent nature glared from his small bright eyes.

"Damn you!" he cried. "Jimmie, she's yours, and a father's got a right to do anything he likes to his own daughter. Give it to her proper if she don't come across with the truth!"

Jimmie stepped closer to her and bared his yellow teeth. "I have n't given you a basting since you were fifteen — but I'll paste you one right in the mouth if you don't talk straight talk!"

"You hear that!" Barney gritted at her. He believed there was justice in his wrath — as indeed there was, of a sort. "Think what Jimmie and I've put into this, in time and hard coin! We've given you your chance, we've made you! And then, after hard work and waiting and our spending so much, and everything comes out exactly as we figured, you go and throw us down — not just yourself, but *us* and *our* rights! Now you talk straight stuff! Tell us, why did you refuse Sherwood when he proposed? And why did you tell me that lie about his not proposing?"

Maggie realized she was in a desperate plight, with these two inflamed gazes upon her. Never had she felt so little of a daughter's liking for Old Jimmie as now when she looked into his lean, harsh, yellow-fanged face. And she had no illusions about Barney. He might love her, as she knew he did; but that would not be a check upon his ruthlessness if he thought himself balked or betrayed.

Just then her telephone began to ring. She started to move toward it, but Barney's grip checked her short.

"You're going to answer me — not any damned telephone! Let it ring!"

The bell rang for a minute or two before it stilled its shrill clamor. Its ringing was in a way a brief respite to Maggie, for it gave her additional time to consider what should be her course. She realized that she dared not let

Barney believe at this moment that she had turned against him. Again she fell back upon her cool, self-confident manner.

"You want to know why? The answer is simple enough. I thought I might try out an improvement of our plan — something that might suit me better."

"What's that?" Barney harshly demanded.

"Since Miss Sherwood fell for me so easy, it struck me that she'd be pretty sure to fall for me if I told her the whole truth about myself. That is, everything except our scheme to play Dick for a sucker."

"What're you driving at?"

"Don't you see? If she forgave me being what I am, and I rather think she would, and with Dick liking me as he does — why, it struck me as the best thing for yours truly to marry Dick for keeps."

"What?" Though Barney's voice was low, it had the effect of a startled and savage roar. "And chuck us overboard?"

"Not at all. If I married Dick for keeps, I intended to pay you a lump sum, or else a regular amount each year."

"No, you don't!" Barney cried in the same muffled roar.

"Perhaps not — I haven't decided," Maggie said evenly. "I've merely been telling you, as you requested me, why I did as I did. I refused Dick, and lied to you, so that I might have more time to think over what I really wanted to do."

Instinctively she had counted on rousing Barney's jealousy in order to throw him off the track of her real thoughts. She succeeded.

"I can tell you what you're going to do!" Barney flung at her with fierce mastery. "You're not going to put over a sure-enough marriage with any Dick Sherwood! When there's that kind of a marriage, I'm going to be the man! And you're going to go right straight ahead with our old plan! Dick'll propose again if you give him half a chance. And when he does, you say 'yes'! Understand? That's what you're going to do!"

There was no safety in openly defying Barney. And as a matter of fact what he had ordered was what, in the shifting currents of her thoughts, the steady momentum of her old ambitions and purposes had been pushing her toward. So she said, in her even voice:

"You waste such a lot of your good energy, Barney, by exploding when there's nothing to blow up. That's exactly what I'd decided to do. Miss Sherwood has asked me out to Cedar Crest to-morrow afternoon, and I'm going."

Barney let go the hold he had kept upon her wrists, and the dark look slowly lifted from his face. "Why did n't you tell a fellow this at first?" he half grumbled. Then with a grim enthusiasm: "And when you come back, you're going to tell us it's all settled!"

"Of course — if he asks me. And now suppose you two go away. You've given me a headache, and I want to rest."

"We'll go," said Barney. "But there may be some more points about this that we may want to talk over a little later to-night. So better get all the rest you can."

But when they had gone and left her to the silence of her pretentious and characterless suite, Maggie did not rest. She had made up her mind; she was going to do as she had said. But there was still that same turmoil within her.

Again she thought of Larry. But she would not admit to herself that her real motive for suddenly deciding to go to Cedar Crest on the morrow was the chance of seeing him.

CHAPTER XXVI

During all these days Larry waited for news of the result of the experiment in psychology which meant so much to his life. He had not expected to hear directly from Maggie; but he had counted upon learning at once from Dick, if not by words, then either from eloquent dejection which would proclaim Dick's refusal (and Larry's success) or from an ebullient joy which would proclaim that Maggie had accepted him. But Dick's sober but not unhappy behavior announced neither of these two to Larry; and the matter was too personal, altogether too delicate, to permit Larry to ask Dick the result, however subtly he might ask it.

So Larry could only wait — and wonder. The truth did not occur to Larry; he did not see that there might be another alternative to the two possible reactions he had calculated upon. He did not bear in mind that Maggie's youthful obstinacy, her belief in herself and her ways, were too solid a structure to yield at once to one moral shock, however wisely planned and however strong. He did not at this time hold in mind that any real change in so decided a character as Maggie, if change there was to be, would be preceded and accompanied by a turbulent period in which she would hardly know who she was, or where she was, or what she was going to do — and that at the end of such a period there might be no change at all.

Inasmuch as just then Maggie was his major interest, it seemed to Larry in his safe seclusion that he was merely marking time, and marking time with feet that were frantically impatient. He felt he could not stand much longer his own inactivity and his ignorance of what Maggie was doing and what was happening to her. He could not remain in this sanctuary pulling strings, and very long and fragile strings, and strings which might be the mistaken ones, for any much greater period. He felt that he simply had to walk out of this splendid safety, back into the dangers from which he had fled, where he might at least have the possible advantage of being in the very midst of Maggie's affairs and fight for her more openly and have a more direct influence upon her.

He knew that, sooner or later, he was going to throw caution aside and appear suddenly among his enemies, unless something of a definite character developed. But for these slow, irritating days he held himself in check with difficulty, hoping that things might come to him, that he would not have to go forth to them.

He had brought Hunt's portrait of Maggie to Cedar Crest in the bottom of his trunk, and kept it locked in his chiffonier. During these days, more frequently than before, he would take out the portrait and in the security of his locked room would gaze long at that keen-visioned portrayal of her many characters. No doubt of it: there was a possible splendid woman there! And no doubt of it: he loved that woman utterly!

During these days of his ignorance, while Maggie was struggling in the darkness of her unexplored being, Larry drove himself grimly at the business to which under happier circumstances he would have gone under the irresistible suasion of pure joy. One afternoon he presented to Miss Sherwood an outline for his growing plan for the development of the Sherwood properties on the basis of good homes at fair rentals. He discovered that, in spite of her generous giving, she had much the same attitude toward Charity as his own: that the only sound Charity, except for those temporarily or permanently handicapped or disabled, was the giving of honest values for honest returns — and that was not Charity at all.

The project of reforming the shiftless character of the Sherwood properties, and of relieving even in a small degree New York's housing congestion, appealed at once to her imagination and her sensible idealism.

"A splendid plan!" she exclaimed, regarding Larry with those wise, humorous eyes of hers, which were now very serious and penetrating. "You have been working much harder than I had thought. And if you will pardon my saying it, you have more of the soundly humane vision which big business enterprise should have than I had thought."

"Thank you!" said Larry.

"That's a splendid dream," she continued; "but it will take hard work to translate that dream into a reality. We shall need architects, builders, a heavy initial expense, time — and a more modern and alert management."

"Yes, Miss Sherwood."

She did not speak for a moment. Her penetrating eyes, which had been fixed on him in close thought, were yet more penetrating. Finally she said:

"That's a big thing, a useful thing. The present agents wish to be relieved of our affairs as soon as I can make arrangements — and I'd like nothing better than for Dick to drop what he's doing and get into something constructive and useful like this. But Dick cannot do it alone; he's too unsettled, and too inexperienced to cope with some of the sharper business practices."

She paused again, still regarding him with those keen eyes, which seemed to be weighing him. Finally she said, almost abruptly:

"Will you take charge of this with Dick? He likes you and respects your judgment; I'm sure you'd help steady him down. Of course you lack practical experience, but you can take in a practical man who will supply this element. Practical experience is one of the commonest articles on the market; vision and initiative are among the rarest — and you have them. What do you say?"

Larry could not say anything at once. The suddenness of her offer, the largeness of his opportunity, bewildered him for the moment. And his bewilderment was added to by his swift realization of quite another element involved in her frank proposition. He was now engaged in the enterprise of foisting a bogus article, Maggie, upon this woman who was offering him her complete confidence — an enterprise of most questionable ethics and very dubious issue. If he accepted her offer, and the result of this enterprise were disaster, what would Miss Sherwood then think of him?

He took refuge in evasion. "I'm not going to try to tell you how much I appreciate your proposition, Miss Sherwood. But do you mind if I hold back my answer for the present and think it over? Anyhow, to do all that is required I must be able to work in the open — and I can't do that until I get free of my entanglements with the police and my old acquaintances."

Thus it was agreed upon. Miss Sherwood turned to another subject. The pre-public show of Hunt's pictures had opened the previous day.

"When you were in the city yesterday, did you get in to see Mr. Hunt's exhibition?"

"No," he answered. "Although I wanted to. But you know I've already seen all of Mr. Hunt's pictures that Mr. Graham has in his gallery. How was the opening?"

"Crowded with guests. And since they had been told that the pictures were unusual and good, of course the people were enthusiastic."

"What kind of prices was Mr. Graham quoting?"

"He was n't quoting any. He told me he was n't going to sell a picture, or even mention a price, until the public exhibition. He's very enthusiastic. He thinks Mr. Hunt is already made — and in a big way."

And then she added, her level gaze very steady on Larry:

"Of course Mr. Hunt is really a great painter. But he needed a jolt to make him go out and really paint his own kind of stuff. And he needed some one like you to put him across in a business way."

When she left, she left Larry thinking: thinking of her saying that Hunt "needed a jolt to make him go out and really paint his own kind of stuff." Hidden behind that remark somewhere could there be the explanation for the break between these two? Larry began to see a glimmer of light. It was entirely possible that Miss Sherwood, in so finished and adroit a manner that Hunt had not discerned her purpose, had herself given him this jolt or at least contributed to its force. It might all have been diplomacy on her part, applied shrewdly to the man she understood and loved. Yes, that might be the explanation. Yes, perhaps she had been doing in a less trying way just what he was seeking to do under more stressful circumstances with Maggie: to arouse him to his best by indirectly working at definite psychological reactions.

That afternoon Hunt appeared at Cedar Crest, and while there dropped in on Larry. The big painter, in his full-blooded, boyish fashion, fairly gasconaded over the success of his exhibit. Larry smiled at the other's exuberant enthusiasm. Hunt was one man who could boast without ever being offensively egotistical, for Hunt, added to his other gifts, had the divine gift of being able to laugh at himself.

Larry saw here an opportunity to forward that other ambition of his: the bringing of Hunt and Miss Sherwood together. And at this instant it flashed upon him that Miss Sherwood's seemingly casual remarks about Hunt had not been casual at all. Perhaps they had been carefully thought out and spoken with a definite purpose. Perhaps Miss Sherwood had been very subtly appointing him her ambassador. She was clever enough for that.

"Stop declaiming those self-written press notices of your unapproachable superiority," Larry interrupted. "If you use your breath up like that you'll drown on dry land. Besides, I just heard something better than this mere articulated air of yours. Better because from a person in her senses."

"Heard it from whom?"

"Miss Sherwood."

"Miss Sherwood! What did she say?"

"That you were a really great painter."

"Huh!" snorted Hunt. "Why should n't she say that? I've proved it!"

"Hunt," said Larry evenly, "you are the greatest painter I ever met, but you also have the distinction of being the greatest of all damned fools."

"What's that, young fellow?"

"You love Miss Sherwood, don't you? At least you've the same as told me that in words, and you've told me that in loud-voiced actions every time you've seen her."

"Well — what if I do?"

"If you had the clearness of vision that is in the glassy eye of a cold boiled lobster you would see that she feels the same way about you."

"See here, Larry" — all the boisterous quality had gone from Hunt's voice, and it was low-pitched and a bit unsteady — "I don't mind your joshing me about myself or my painting, but don't fool with me about anything that's really important."

"I'm not fooling you. I'm sure Miss Sherwood feels that way."

"How do you know?"

"I've got a pair of eyes that don't belong to a cold boiled lobster. And when I see a thing, I know I see it."

"You're all wrong, Larry. If you'd heard what she said to me less than a year ago —"

"You make me tired!" interrupted Larry. "You two were made for each other. She's waiting for you to step up and talk man's talk to her — and instead you sulk in your tent and mumble about something you think she might have thought or said a year ago! You're too sensitive; you're too proud; you've got too few brains. It's a million dollars to one that in your handsome, well-bred way you've fallen out with her over something that probably never existed and certainly does n't exist now. Forget it all, and walk right up and ask her!"

"Larry, if I thought there was a chance that you are right —"

"A single question will prove whether I'm right!"

Hunt did not speak for a moment. "I guess I've never seen my part of it all in the way you put it, Larry." He stood up, his whole being subdued yet tense. "I'm going to slide back into town and think it all over."

Larry followed him an hour later, bent on routine business of the Sherwood estate. Toward seven o'clock he was studying the present decrepitude and future possibilities of a row of Sherwood apartment houses on the West Side, when, as he came out of one building and started into another, a firm hand fell upon his shoulder and a voice remarked:

"So, Larry, you're in New York?"

Larry whirled about. For the moment he felt all the life go out of him. Beside him stood Detective Casey, whom he had last seen on the night of his wild flight when Casey had feigned a knockout in order to aid Larry's escape from Gavegan. Any other man affiliated with his enemies Larry would have struck down and tried to break away from. But not Casey.

"Hello, Casey. Well, I suppose you're going to invite me to go along with you?"

"Where were *you* going?"

"Into this house."

"Then I'll invite myself to go along with you."

He quickly pushed Larry before him into the hallway, which was empty since all the tenants were at their dinner. Larry remembered the scene down in Deputy Police Commissioner Barlow's office, when the Chief of Detectives had demanded that he become a stool-pigeon working under Gavegan and Casey, and the grilling and the threats, more than fulfilled, which had followed.

"Going to give me a little private quiz first, Casey," he asked, "and then call in Gavegan and lead me down to Barlow?"

"Not unless Gavegan or some one else saw and recognized you, which I know they did n't since I was watching for that very thing. And not unless you yourself feel hungry for a visit to Headquarters."

"If I feel hungry, it's an appetite I'm willing to make wait."

"You know I don't want to pinch you. My part in this has been a dirty job that was just pushed my way. You know that I know you've been framed and double-crossed, and that I won't run you in unless I can't get out of it.'

"Thanks, Casey. You're too white to have to run with people like Barlow and Gavegan. But if it was n't to pinch me, why did you stop me out there in the street?"

"Been hoping I might some day run into you on the quiet. There are some things I've learned — never mind how — that I wanted to slip you for your own good."

"Go to it, Casey."

"First, I've got a hunch that it was Barney Palmer who tipped off the police about Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt, and then spread it among all the crooks that you were the stool and squealer."

"Yes, I'd guessed that much."

"Second, I've got a hunch that it really was from Barney Palmer that Barlow got his idea of making you become a stool-pigeon. Barney is a smooth one all right, and he figured what would happen. He knew you would refuse, and he knew Barlow would uncork hell beneath you. Barney certainly called every turn."

"What — what —" stammered Larry. "Why, then Barney must be —" He paused, utterly astounded by the newness of the possibility that had just risen in his mind.

"You've got it, Larry," Casey went on. "Barney is a police stool. Has been one for years. Works directly for Barlow. We're not supposed to know anything about it. He's turned up a lot of big ones. That's why it's safe for Barney to pull off anything he likes."

"Barney a police stool!" Larry repeated in the stupor of his amazement.

"Guess that's all the news I wanted to hand you, Larry, so I'll be on my way. Here's wishing you luck — and for God's sake, don't let yourself be pinched by us. So-long." And with that Casey slipped out of the hallway.

For a moment Larry stood moveless where Casey had left him. Then fierce purpose, and a cautious recklessness, surged up and took mastery of him. It had required what Casey had told him to end his irksome waiting and wavering. No longer could he remain in his hiding-place, safe himself, trying to save Maggie by slow, indirect endeavor. The time had now come for very different methods. The time had come to step forth into the open, taking, of course, no unnecessary risk, and to have it out face to face with his enemies, who were also Maggie's real enemies, though she counted them her friends — to save Maggie against her own will, if he could save her in no other way.

And having so decided, Larry walked quickly out of the hallway into the street.

CHAPTER XXVII

ON the sidewalk Larry glanced swiftly around him. Half a block down the street on the front of a drug-store was a blue telephone flag. A minute later he was inside a telephone booth in the drug-store, asking first for the Hotel Grantham, and then asking the Grantham operator to be connected with Miss Maggie Cameron.

There was a long wait. While he listened for Maggie's voice he blazed with terrible fury against Barney Palmer. For Maggie to be connected with a straight crook, that idea had been bad enough. But for her to be under the influence of the worst crook of all, a stool, a cunning traitor to his own friends — that was more than could possibly be stood! In his rage in Maggie's behalf he forgot for the moment the many evils Barney had done to himself. He thought of wild, incoherent, vaguely tremendous plans. First he would get Maggie away from Barney and Old Jimmie — somehow. Then he would square accounts with those two — again by an undefined somehow.

Presently the tired, impersonal voice of the Grantham operator remarked against his ear-drum: "Miss Cameron don't answer."

"Have her paged, please," he requested.

Larry, of course, could not know that his telephone call was the very one which had rung in Maggie's room while Barney and Old Jimmie were with her, and which Barney had harshly forbidden her to answer. Therefore he could not know that any attempt to get Maggie by telephone just then was futile.

When he came out of the booth, the impersonal voice having informed him that Miss Cameron was not in, it was with the intention of calling Maggie up between eight and nine when she probably would have returned from dinner where he judged her now to be. He knew that Dick Sherwood had no engagement with her, for Dick was to be out at Cedar Crest that evening, so he judged it almost certain Maggie would be at home and alone later on.

Having nothing else to do for an hour and a half, he thought of a note he had received from the Duchess in that morning's mail asking him to come down to see her when he was next in town. Thirty minutes later he was in the familiar room behind the pawnshop. The Duchess asked him if he had eaten, and on his reply that he had not and did not care to, instead of proceeding to the business of her letter she mumbled something and went into the pawnshop.

She left Larry for the very simple reason that now that she had him here she was uncertain what she should say, and how far she should go. Unknown to either, one thread of the drama of Larry and Maggie was being spun in the brain and heart of the Duchess; and being spun with pain to her, and in very great doubt. True, she had definitely decided, for Larry's welfare, that the facts about Maggie's parentage should never be known from her — and since the only other person who could tell the truth was Jimmie Carlisle, and his interests were all apparently in favor of silence, then it followed that the truth would never be known from any one. But having so decided, and decided definitely and finally, the Duchess had proceeded to wonder if she had decided wisely.

Day and night this had been the main subject of her thought. Could she be wrong in her estimate of Maggie's character, and what she might turn out to be? Could she be wrong in her belief that, given enough time, Larry would outgrow his infatuation for Maggie? And since she was in such doubt about these two points, had she any right, and was it for the best, to suppress a fact that might so gravely influence both matters? She did not know.

What she wanted was whatever was best for Larry—and so in her doubt she had determined to talk again to Larry, hoping that the interview might in some way replace her uncertainty with stability of purpose.

Presently she returned to the inner room, and in her direct way and using the fewest possible words, which had created for her her reputation of a woman who never spoke and who was packed with strange secrets, she asked Larry what he had done concerning Maggie. He told her of the plan he had evolved, of Maggie's visit to Cedar Crest, of his ignorance of Maggie's reactions. To all this his grandmother made response neither by word nor by change of expression. He then went on to tell her of what he had just learned from Casey of Barney's maneuvering his misfortunes.

The old head nodded. "Yes, Barney's just that sort," she said in her flat monotone.

And then she came to the purpose of her sending for him. "How do you feel about Maggie now?"

"The same as before."

"You love her?"

"Yes — and always will," he said firmly.

She was silent once more. Then, "What are you going to do next?"

"Break things up between her and Barney and her father. Get her away from them."

She asked no further questions. Larry was as settled as a man could be. But was Maggie worth while? — that was the great question still unanswered.

"Just what did you want me for, grandmother?" he asked her finally.

"Something which I thought might have developed, but which has n't."

And so she let him go away without telling him. And wishing to shape things for the best for him, she was troubled by the same doubts as before.

His visit with his grandmother had had no meaning to Larry, since he had no guess of the struggle going on within that ancient, inscrutable figure. The visit had for him merely served to fill in a nervous, useless hour. His rage against Barney had all the while possessed him too thoroughly for him to give more than the mere surface of his mind to what had passed between his grandmother and himself. And when he had left her, his rage at Barney's treachery and his impetuous desire to snatch Maggie away from her present influences, so stormed within him that his usually cautious judgment was blown away and recklessness swept like a gale into control of him.

When he called up the Grantham a second time, at nine o'clock, Maggie's voice came to him:

"Hello. Who is this, please?"

"Mr. Brandon."

He heard a stifled "Oh!" at the other end of the line. "I'm coming right up to see you," he said.

"I — I don't think you —"

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Larry interrupted the startled voice, and hung up.

He counted that Maggie, after his sparing her at Cedar Crest, would receive him and treat him at least no worse than an enemy with whom there was a half-hour's truce. Sure enough, when he rang the bell of her suite, Maggie herself admitted him to her sitting-room. She was taut and pale, her look neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"Don't you know the risk you're running," she whispered when the door was closed — "coming here like this, in the open?"

"The time has come for risks, Maggie," he announced.

"But you were safe enough where you were. Why take such risks?"

"For your sake."

"My sake?"

"To take you away from these people you're tied up with. Take you away now."

At an earlier time this would have been a fuse to a detonation of defiance from her. But now she said nothing at all, and that was something.

"Since I've come out into the open, everything's going to be in the open. Listen, Maggie!" The impulse had suddenly come upon him, since his plan to awaken Maggie by her psychological reactions had apparently failed, to tell her everything. "Listen, Maggie! I'm going to lay all my cards on the table, and show you every card I've played. You were invited to come out to Cedar Crest because I schemed to have you come. And the reason I schemed to have you invited was, I reasoned that being received in such a frank, generous, unsuspecting way, by a woman like Miss Sherwood, would make you sick of what you were doing and you would drop it of your own accord. But it seems I reasoned wrong."

"So — you were behind that!" she breathed.

"I was. Though I could n't have done it if Dick Sherwood had n't been honestly infatuated with you. But now I'm through with working under cover, through with indirect methods. From now on every play's in the open, and it's straight to the point with everything. So get ready. I'm going to take you away from Barney and Old Jimmie."

The mention of these two names had a swift and magical effect upon her. But instead of arousing belligerency, they aroused an almost frantic agitation.

"You must leave at once, Larry. Barney and my father were here before dinner, and they've just telephoned they were coming back!"

"Coming back! That's the best argument you could make for my staying!"

"But, Larry — they both have keys, and Barney always carries a gun!"

"I stay here, unless you leave with me. Listen to some more, Maggie. I laid all the cards on the table. Do you know the kind of people you're tied up with? I'll not say anything about your father, for I guess you know all there is to know. But Barney Palmer! He's the lowest kind of crook that breathes. There's been a lot of talk about squealers and police stools. Well, the big squealer, the big stool, is Barney Palmer!"

"I don't believe it!" she cried involuntarily.

"It's true! I've got it straight. Barney wanted to smash me, because I'd made up my mind to quit the old game and because he wanted to get me out of his way with you. So he framed it up so that I appeared to be a squealer, and started the gangmen after me. And he put Barlow up to the idea of forcing me to be a stool, and then framing me when I refused. It was Barney who fixed things so I had to go to jail, or be shot up, or run away. It was Barney Palmer who squealed on Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt, and who's been squealing on his other pals. And that's the sort you're stringing along with!"

She gazed at him in appalled half conviction. He remained silent to let his truth sink in.

They were standing so, face to face, when a key grated in the outer door of the little hallway as on the occasion of Larry's first visit here. And as on that occasion, Maggie sprang swiftly forward and shot home the bolt of the inner door. Then she turned and caught Larry's arm.

"It's Barney — I told you he was coming!" she whispered. "Oh, why did n't you go before? Come on!"

She tried to drag him toward her bedroom door, through which she had once helped him escape. But this time he was not to be moved.

"I stay right here," he said to her.

There was the sound of a futile effort to turn the lock of the inner door; then Barney's voice called out:

"What's the matter, Maggie? Open the door."

Maggie, still clutching Larry's resisting arm, stood gasping in wide-eyed consternation.

"Open the door for them, Maggie," Larry whispered.

"I'll not do it!" she whispered back.

"Open it, or I will," he ordered.

Their gazes held a moment longer while Barney rattled at the lock. Then slowly, falteringly, her amazed eyes over her shoulder upon him, Maggie crossed and unlocked the door. Barney entered, Old Jimmie just behind him.

"I say, Maggie, what was the big idea in keeping us —" he was beginning in a grumbling tone, when he saw Larry just beyond her. His complaint broke off in mid-breath; he stopped short and his dark face twitched with his surprise.

"Larry Brainard!" he finally exclaimed. Old Jimmie, suddenly tense, blinked and said nothing.

"Hello, Barney; hello, Jimmie," Larry greeted his former allies, putting on an air of geniality. "Been a long time since we three met. Don't stand there in the door. Come right in."

Barney was keen enough to see, though Larry's attitude was careless and his tone light, that his eyes were bright and hard. Barney moved forward a couple of paces, alert for anything, and Old Jimmie followed. Maggie looked on at the three men, her girlish figure taut and hardly breathing.

"Did n't know you were in New York," said Barney.

"Well, here I am all right," returned Larry with his menacing cheerfulness.

By now Barney had recovered from his first surprise. He felt it time to assert his supremacy.

"How do you come to be here with Maggie?" he demanded abruptly.

"Happened to catch sight of her on the street to-day.

Trailed her here to the Grantham, and to-night I just dropped in."

Barney's tone grew more authoritative, more ugly. "We told you long ago we were through with you. So why did you come here?"

"That's easy answered, Barney. The last time we were all together, you'd come to take Maggie away. This is that same scene reproduced — only this time *I've* come to take Maggie away."

"What's that?" snapped Barney.

Larry's voice threw off its assumed geniality, and became drivingly hard. "And to get Maggie to come, I've been telling her the kind of a bird you are, Barney Palmer! Oh, I've got the straight dope on you! I've been telling her how you framed me, and were able to frame me because you are Chief Barlow's stool."

Barney went as near white as it was possible for him to become, and his mouth sagged. "What — what — " he stammered.

"I've been telling her that you are the one who really squealed on Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt."

"You're a damned liar!" Barney burst out, and instantly from beneath his left arm he whipped an automatic which he thrust against Larry's stomach. "Take that back, damn you, or I'll blow you straight to hell!"

"Barney! — Larry!" interjected Maggie in sickened fright.

"This is nothing to worry over, Maggie," Larry said. He looked back at Barney. "Oh, I knew you would flash a gun on me at some stage of the game. But you're not going to shoot."

"You'll see, if you don't take that back!"

Larry realized that his hot blood had driven him into an enterprise of daring, in which only bluff and the playing of his highest cards could help him through.

"You don't think I was such a fool as to walk into this place without taking precautions," he said contemptuously. "You won't shoot, Barney, because since I knew I might meet you and you'd pull a gun, I had myself searched by two friends just before I came up here. They'll testify I was not armed. They know you, and know you so well that they'll be able to identify the thing in your hand as your gun. So no matter what Maggie and Jimmie may testify, the verdict will be cold-blooded murder and the electric chair will be your finish. And that's why I know you won't shoot. So you might as well put the gun away."

Barney neither spoke nor moved.

"I've called your bluff, Barney," Larry said sharply. "Put that gun away, or I'll take it from you!"

Barney's glare wavered. The pistol sank from its position. With a lightning-swift motion Larry wrenched it from Barney's hand.

"Guess I'd better have it, after all," he said, slipping it into a pocket. "Keep you out of temptation."

And then in a subdued voice that was steely with menace: "I'm too busy to attend to you now, Barney — but, by God, I'm going to square things with you for the dirt you've done me, and I'm going to show you up for a stool and a squealer!" He wheeled on Old Jimmie. "And the only reason I'll be easy with you, Jimmie Carlisle, is because you are Maggie's father — though you're the rottenest thing as a father God ever let breathe!"

Old Jimmie shrank slightly before Larry's glower, and his little eyes gleamed with the fear of a rat that is cornered. But he said nothing.

Larry turned his back upon the two men. "We're through with this bunch, Maggie. Put on a hat and a wrap, and let's go. We can send for your things."

"No you don't, Maggie," snarled Barney, before Maggie could speak.

Old Jimmie made his first positive motion since entering the room. He shifted quickly to Maggie's side and seized her arm.

"You're my daughter, and you stay with me!" he ordered. "I brought you up, and you do exactly what I tell you to! You're not going with Larry — he's lying about Barney. You stay with me!"

"Come on, let's go, Maggie," repeated Larry.

"You stay with me!" repeated Jimmie.

Thus ordered and appealed to, Maggie was areel with contradicting thoughts and impulses while the three men awaited her action. In fact she had no clear thought at all. She never knew later what determined her course at this bewildered moment: perhaps it was partly a continuance of her doubt of Larry, perhaps partly once more sheer momentum, perhaps her instinctive feeling that her place was with the man she believed to be her father.

"Yes, I'll stay with you," she said to Old Jimmie.

"That's the signal for you to be on your way, Larry Brainard!" Barney snapped at him triumphantly.

Larry realized, all of a sudden, that his coming here was no more than a splendid gesture to which his anger had excited him. Indeed there was nothing for him but to be on his way.

"I've told you the truth, Maggie; and you'll be sorry that you have not left — if not sorry soon, then sorry a little later."

He turned to Barney with a last shot; he could not leave the gloating Barney Palmer his unalloyed triumph. "I told you I had the straight dope on you, Barney. Here's some more of it. I know exactly what your game is, and I know exactly who your sucker is. We'll see if you put it over — you squealer! Good-night, all."

With that Larry walked out. Old Jimmie regarded his partner with suspicion.

"How about that, Barney — you being a stool and a squealer?" he demanded.

"I tell you it's all a lie — a damned lie!" cried Barney with feverish emphasis.

"I hope it is!" breathed Old Jimmie.

This was a subject Barney wanted to get away from. "Maggie," he demanded, "is what Larry Brainard said about how he came here the truth? — his seeing you on the street and then following you here?"

"How do I know where he first saw me?"

"But is to-night the first time you've seen him?"

"It is."

"Sure you haven't been seeing him?" demanded Barney's quick jealousy.

"I have not."

"Did he tell you where he came from? — where he hangs out?"

"No."

Old Jimmie interrupted this cross-examination.

"You're wasting good time asking these questions. Barney, do you realize the cold fact that it's not a good thing for you, nor for us, for Larry Brainard to be back in New York, floating around as he pleases?"

"I should say not!" Barney saw he was facing a sudden crisis, and in the need for quick action he spoke without thought of Maggie. "We've got to look after him at once!"

"Tell the bunch he's back, and let them take care of him?" suggested Old Jimmie.

Barney considered rapidly. If Larry knew of his arrangement with the police, then perhaps his secret was beginning to leak through to others. He decided that for the present it would be wiser to keep from these old friends and allies.

"Not the bunch — the police!" he said inspiredly. "They're after him, anyhow, and are sore. All we've got to do is slip them word — they'll do the rest!" And then with the sharper emphasis of an immediate plan:

"We don't want to lose a minute. I know where Gavegan hangs out at this time of night. Come on!"

With a bare "Good-night" to Maggie the two men hurried forth on their pressing mission. Left to herself, Maggie sank into a chair and wildly considered the many elements of this new situation. Presently two thoughts emerged to dominance: Whether Larry was right or wrong, he had risked coming out of his safety for her sake — perhaps had risked all he had won for her sake. And now the police were to be set after him, with that Gavegan heading the pack.

Perhaps the further thinking Maggie did did not result in cool, mature wisdom — for her thoughts were the operations of a panicky mind. Somehow she had to get warning to Larry of this imminent police hunt! Without doubt Larry would return to Cedar Crest sometime that night. Word should be sent to him there. A letter was too uncertain in such a crisis. Of course she had an invitation to go to Cedar Crest the following afternoon, and she might warn him then — but that might be too late. She dared not telephone or telegraph — for that might somehow direct dangerous attention to the exact spot where Larry was hidden. Also she had an instinct, operating unconsciously long before she had any thought of what she was eventually to do, not to let Barney or Old Jimmie find out, or even guess, that she had warned Larry — not yet.

There seemed nothing that she herself could do. Then she thought of the Duchess. That was the way out! The Duchess would know some way in which to get Larry word.

Five minutes later, in her plainest suit and hat, Maggie in a taxicab was rolling down toward the Duchess's — from where, only a few months back, she had started forth upon her great career.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Old Jimmie did not like meeting the police any oftener than a meeting was forced upon him, and so he slipped away and allowed Barney Palmer to undertake alone the business of settling Larry. Barney found Gavegan exactly where he had counted: lingering over his late dinner in the café of a famous Broadway restaurant — a favorite with some of the detectives and higher officials of the Police Department — in which café, in happier days now deeply mourned, Gavegan had had all the exhilaration he wanted to drink at the standing invitation of the proprietor, and where even yet on occasion a bit of the old exhilaration was brought to Gavegan's table in a cup or served him in a room above to which he had had whispered instructions to retire. The proprietor had in the old days liked to stand well with the police; and though his bar was now devoted to legal drinks — or at least obliging Federal officers reported it to be — he still liked to stand well with the police.

Gavegan was at a table with a minor producer of musical shows, to whom Barney had been of occasional service in securing the predominant essential of such music — namely, shapely young women. Barney nodded to Gavegan, chatted for a few minutes with his musical-comedy friend, during which he gave Gavegan a signal, then crossed to the once-crowded bar, now sunk to isolation and the lowly estate of soft drinks, and ordered a ginger ale. Not until then did he notice Barlow, chief of the Detective Bureau, at a corner table. Barney gave no sign of recognition, and Barlow, after a casual glance at him, returned to his food.

Barney, in solitude at one end of the bar, slowly sipped with a sort of indignation against his kickless purchase. Presently Gavegan was beside him, having most convincing ill-luck in his attempts to light his cigar from a box of splintering safety matches which stood at that end of the bar.

"Well, what is it?" Gavegan whispered out of that corner of his mouth which was not occupied by his cigar. He did not look at Barney.

"Any clue to Larry Brainard yet?" Barney whispered also out of a corner of his mouth, glass at his lips. Likewise he seemed not to notice the man beside him.

"Naw! Still out West somewhere. Them Chicago bums could n't catch a crook if he walked along State Street with a sign-board on him!"

"Saw Larry Brainard to-night."

Gavegan had difficulty in maintaining his attitude of non-awareness of his bar-mate.

"Where?"

"Right here in New York."

"What! Where'd you see him?"

"Coming out of the Grantham."

"When?"

"Fifteen minutes ago."

"Know where he went to? — where he hangs out? — know anything else?"

"That's everything. Thought I'd better slip it to you as quick as I could."

"This time that bird'll not get away!" growled Gavegan, still in a whisper. "Twenty-four hours and he'll be in the cooler!"

Finally Gavegan managed to get a flame from one of those irritatingly splintery Swedish matches made in Japan. Cigar alight he walked over to Barlow's table. He conversed with his Chief a moment or two, then went out. After a minute Barney saw Chief Barlow crossing toward the bar. Barney seemed not to notice this movement. Barlow likewise paused beside him to light a cigar; and from the side of the Chief's mouth there issued:

"Room 613."

Barlow passed on. Presently Barney finished the dreary drudgery of drink and sauntered out. Five minutes later, having exercised the proper caution, he was in Room 613, and the door was locked.

"What's this dope you just handed Gavegan about Larry Brainard?" demanded Barlow.

Barney gave his information again, but this time more fully. Of course he omitted all mention of Maggie and the enterprise which Larry had sought to interrupt; it was part of the tacit understanding between these two that Barlow should have no knowledge of Barney's professional doings, unless such knowledge should be forced upon him by events or people too strong to be ignored.

"Did Brainard drop any clue that might give us a lead as to where he's hiding out?"

Barney remembered something Larry had said half an hour before, which he had considered mere boasting. "He said he knew I had some game on, and he said he knew who the sucker was I was planning to trim."

"Did he say who the sucker was?"

"No."

"If Larry Brainard really did know, then who would he be having in mind?"

Barney hesitated; but he perceived that this was a question which had to be answered. "Young Dick Sherwood, of the swell Sherwood family — you know."

Barlow did not pursue the subject. According to his arrangement with Barney, the latter's private activities were none of his business.

"I'll get busy with the drag-net; we'll land Brainard this time," said Barlow. And then with a grim look at Barney: "But Larry Brainard's not what I got you up here to talk about, Palmer. I wanted to talk about two words to you — and say 'em to you right between your eyes."

"Go ahead, Chief."

"First, you ain't been worth a damn to me for several months. You've given me no value received for me keeping my men off of you. You have n't turned up a single thing."

"Come, now, Chief—you're forgetting about Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt."

"Chicken feed! They're out on bail, and when their cases come up, they'll beat them! Besides, you did n't give me that tip to help me; you gave it to me so that you could fix things to put Larry Brainard in bad with all his old friends. You did that to help yourself. Shut up! Don't try to deny it. I know!"

Barney did not attempt denial. Barlow went on:

"And the second thing I want to tell you, and tell you hard, is this: You gotta turn in some business! The easy way you've been going makes it look like you've forgot I've got hold of you where the hair's long. Young man, you'd better remember that I've got you cold for that Gregory stock business — you and Old Jimmie Carlisle. Got all the papers in a safety-deposit vault, and got three witnesses doing stretches in Sing Sing. Keep on telling yourself all that! and keep on telling yourself that, if you don't come across, some day soon I'll suddenly discover that you're the guilty party in that Gregory affair, and I'll bring down those witnesses I've got cached in Sing Sing."

Barney moved uneasily in his chair. He knew the bargain he had made, and did not like to dwell upon the conditions under which he was a licensed adventurer.

"No need to rag me like this, Chief," he protested. "Sure I remember all you've said. And you're not going to have cause to be sore much longer. There'll be plenty doing."

"See that there is! And see that you don't pull any raw work. And see that you don't let your foot slip. For if you do, you know what'll happen to you. Now get out!"

Barney got out, again protesting that he would not be found failing. He was not greatly disturbed by what Barlow had said. Every so often there had to be just such sessions, and every so often Barlow had to let off just such steam.

Barney's errand was done. The police of the city were on Larry's trail and his share in the matter was and would remain unknown. Thus far all was well. He had no doubt of Larry's early capture, now that he was back in New York, and now that the whole police force had been promptly warned and were hotly after him, and now that all avenues of exit would instantly be, in fact by this time were, under surveillance and closed against him — and now that every refuge of the criminal world was only a trap for him. No, there was n't a doubt of Larry's early capture. There could n't be. And once Larry was locked up, things would be much better. Barlow would see that Larry did n't talk undesirable things, or at least that such talk was not heard. It was n't exactly pleasant or safe having Larry at large, free to blurt out to the wrong persons those things about Barney's being a stool and a squealer.

Greatly comforted, though eager for news of the chase, Barney started on his evening's routine of visiting the gayer restaurants. Business is business, and a man suffers when he neglects it. True, this was a neat proposition which he had in hand; but that would soon be cleaned up, and Businessman Barney desired to be all ready to move forward into further enterprises.

In the meanwhile there had been a session between Maggie and the Duchess. At about the time Barney had whispered his unlipped news to Gavegan, Maggie, breathless with her frantic haste though she had made the journey in a taxicab, entered the familiar room behind the pawnshop.

"Good-evening, Maggie." The voice was casual, indifferent, though at that moment there was no person that the Duchess, pondering her problems, more wished to see. "Sit down. What's the matter?"

"The police know Larry is in New York and are after him!"

"How do you know?"

Rapidly Maggie told of the happenings in her sitting-room, and of Barney and Old Jimmie starting out to warn Gavegan. The Duchess heard every word, but most of her faculties were concentrated upon a reëxamination of Maggie and upon those questions which had been troubling her all evening and for these many days. Was there good in Maggie? Was she justified in longer suppressing the truth of Maggie's parentage?

"Why are you telling me all this?" the Duchess asked, when Maggie had finished her rapid recital.

"Why! Is n't it plain? I want you to get warning to Larry that the police are after him!"

"Why not do it yourself?"

"I'm going out where he is to-morrow, but that may be too late."

Maggie gave her other reasons, such as they were. The old woman's eyes never left Maggie's flushed face, and yet never showed any interest.

"I thought you were tied up with Barney and Old Jimmie," the Duchess commented. "Why are you going against them in this, and trying to help Larry?"

"What's the difference why I'm doing it," Maggie cried with feverish impatience, "so long as I'm trying to help him out of this!"

"Don't you realize," continued the calm old voice, "that Larry must already know, as a matter of course, that the police and all the old crowd are after him?"

"Perhaps he does, and perhaps he does n't. All the same, he should know for certain! The big point is, will you get Larry word?"

A moment passed and the Duchess did not speak. In fact this time she had not heard Maggie, so intent was she in trying to look through Maggie's dark, eager eyes to the very core of Maggie's being.

"Will you get Larry word?" Maggie repeated impatiently.

The Duchess came out of her study. There was a sudden thrill within her, but it did not show in her voice.

"Yes."

"At once?"

"As soon as telling him will do any good. And now you better hurry back to your hotel, if you don't want Barney and Old Jimmie to suspect what you've been up to. Though why you still want to hang on to that pair, knowing what they are, is more than I can guess."

She stood up. "Wait a minute," she said as Maggie started for the door. Maggie turned back, and for another moment the Duchess silently peered deep into Maggie's eyes. Then she said shortly, almost sharply: "At your age I was twice as pretty as you are — and twice as clever — and I played much the same game. Look what I got out of life! . . . Good-night." And abruptly the Duchess wheeled about and mounted the stairway.

Twenty minutes later Maggie was back at the Grantham, her absence unobserved. Though palpitant over Larry's fate, she had the satisfaction of having achieved with Larry's grandmother what she had set forth to achieve. She did not know, could not know, that what she had accepted as her achievement was inconsequential compared to what had actually been achieved by her spontaneous appearance before the troubled Duchess.

CHAPTER XXIX

As the Duchess had gazed into Maggie's excited, imploring eyes, it had been borne in upon her carefully judging and painfully hesitant mind that there was better than a fifty per cent chance that Larry was right in his estimate of Maggie; that Maggie's inclination toward criminal adventure, her supreme self-confidence, all her bravado, were but the superficial though strong tendencies developed by her unfortunate environment; that within that cynical, worldly shell there were the vital and plastic makings of a real woman.

And so the long-troubled Duchess, who to her acquaintances had always seemed as unemotional as the dust-coated, moth-eaten parrot which stood in mummified aloofness upon her safe, had made a momentous decision that had sent through her old veins the thrilling sap of a great crisis, a great suspense. She had tried to guide destiny. She was now through with such endeavor. She had no right, because of her love for Larry, to withhold longer the facts of Maggie's parentage. She was now going to tell the truth, and let events work out as they would.

But the events — what were they going to be?

For a moment the Duchess had been impelled to tell the truth straight out to Maggie. But she had caught herself in time. This whole affair was Larry's affair, and the truth belonged to him to be used as he saw fit. So when she had told Maggie that she would get word to Larry, it was this truth which she had had in mind, and only in a very minor way the news which Maggie had brought.

This was, of course, such a truth as could be safely communicated only by word of mouth. The Duchess realized that Larry no longer dared come to her, and that therefore she must manage somehow to get to him. And get to him without betraying his whereabouts.

There was little chance that the police would search her place or greatly bother her. To the police mind, now that Larry was aware he was known to be in New York, the pawnshop would obviously be the last place in which he would seek refuge or through which he would have dealings. Nevertheless, the Duchess deemed it wise to lose no moment and to neglect no possible caution. Therefore, while Barney was still with Chief Barlow and before the general order regarding Larry had more than reached the various police stations, the Duchess, in cape, hat, and veil, was out of her house. A block up the street lived the owner of two or three taxicabs, concerning whom the Duchess, who was almost omniscient in her own world, knew much that the said owner ardently desired should be known no further. A few sentences with this gentleman, and fifteen minutes later, huddled back in the darkened corner of a taxicab, she rolled over the Queensboro Bridge out upon Long Island on her mission of releasing a fact whose effect she could not foresee.

An hour and a half after that Larry was leading her to a bench in the scented darkness of the Sherwoods' lawn. She had telephoned "Mr. Brandon" from a drug-store booth in Flushing, and Larry had been waiting for her near the entrance to Cedar Crest.

"What brought you out here like this, grandmother?" Larry whispered in amazement as he sat down beside her.

"To tell you that the police are after you," she whispered back.

"I knew that already."

"Yes, I knew that you would."

"But how did you find out?"

"Maggie told me."

"Maggie!"

"She came down to see me, told me what had just happened at her place, told me about Barney hurrying away to slip the news to that Gavegan, and begged me to warn you at once. She was terribly nervous and wrought up."

"Maggie did that!" he breathed. His heart leaped at her unexpected concern for him. "Maggie did that!" And then: "There was n't any need; she should have known that I would know."

"It was rather foolish in a way — but Maggie was too excited to use cool reason."

His grandmother did not speak for a moment. "Her losing her head and coming shows that she cares for you, Larry."

He could make no response. This was indeed the clearest evidence Maggie had yet given that possibly she might care.

"Maggie may have lost her head in her excitement," he managed to say; "but, grandmother, there was no reason for you to lose your head so far as to come away out here to tell me about the police."

"I did n't come away out here to tell you about the police," she replied. "I came to tell you something else."

"Yes?"

"You 're sure you really care for Maggie?"

"I told you that when I was down to see you this evening."

Though the Duchess had decided, the desire to protect Larry remained tenaciously in her and made it hard for her jealous love to take a risk. "You 're sure she might turn out all right — that is, under better influences?"

"I 'm sure, grandmother." He recalled how a few hours earlier at the Grantham the demand of Old Jimmie that she remain with him had seemed the force that had controlled her decision. "There would be no doubt of it if it were not for Old Jimmie, and the people he 's kept her among, and the ideas he 's been feeding her since she was a baby. I don't think she has any love for her father; but they say blood is mighty thick, and I guess with her it's just the usual instinct of a child to stand with her father and do what he says. Yes, if she were not held back and held down by having Old Jimmie for a father, I'm sure she'd be all right."

The Duchess felt that the moment had now arrived for her to unloose her secret. But despite her fixed purpose to tell, her words had to be forced out, and were halting, bald.

"Jimmie Carlisle — is not her father."

"What's that?" exclaimed Larry.

"Not so loud. I said Jimmie Carlisle is not her father."

"Grandmother!"

"Her father is Joe Ellison."

"Grandmother!" He caught her hands. "Why — why — " But for a moment his utter dumbfoundment paralyzed his speech. "You're — you're sure of that?" he finally got out.

"Yes." She went on and told of how her suspicion had been aroused, of her interview with Joe Ellison which had transmuted suspicion into certainty, of her theory of the motives which had actuated Jimmie Carlisle in so perverting the directions of the man who had held Jimmie as his most trusted friend.

Larry was fairly stunned by this recital of what had been done. And he was further stunned as he realized the fullness of what now seemed to be the circumstances.

"God, think of it!" he breathed. "Maggie trying to be a great adventuress because she was brought up that way, because she thinks her father wants her to be that —and having never a guess of the truth! And Joe Ellison believing that his daughter is a nice, simple girl, happily ignorant of the life he tried to shield her from — and having never a guess of the truth! What a situation! And if they should ever find out —"

He broke off, appalled by the power and magnitude of what he vaguely saw. Presently he said in a numbed, awed voice:

"They should know the truth. But how are they to find out?"

"I'm leaving all that to you, Larry. Maggie and Joe Ellison are your affair. It's up to you to decide what you think best to do."

Larry was silent for several moments. "You've known this for some time, grandmother?"

"For several weeks."

"Why did n't you tell me before?"

"I was afraid it might somehow bring you closer to Maggie, and I did n't want that," she answered honestly. "Now I think a little better of Maggie. And you've proved to me I can trust a great deal more to your judgment. Yes, I guess that's the chief reason I've come out here to tell you this: you've proved to me I've got to respect your judgment. And so whatever you may do — about Maggie or anything else — will be all right with me."

She did not wait for a response, but stood up. Her voice which had been shot through with emotion these last few minutes was now that flat, mechanical monotone to which the habitants of her little street were accustomed.

"I must be getting back to the city. Good-night."

He started to accompany her to her car, but she forbade him, saying that it would not help matters to have him seen and possibly recognized by the taxicab driver; and so she went out of the grounds alone. Within another hour and a half she was set down unobserved in a dim side street in Brooklyn. Thence she made her way on foot to the Subway and rode home. If the police had noticed her absence and should question her, she could refuse to answer, or say that she had been visiting late with a friend in Brooklyn.

Larry sat long out in the night after his grandmother had left him. What should he do with this amazing information placed at his disposal? Tell Joe Ellison? Or tell Maggie? Or tell both? Or himself try to meet Jimmie Carlisle and pay that traitor to Joe Ellison and that malformer of Maggie the coin he had earned?

But for hours the situation itself was still too bewildering in its many phases for Larry to give concentrated thought to what should be its attempted solution. Not until dawn was beginning to awaken dully, as with a protracted yawn, out of the shadowy Sound, was he able really to hold his mind with clearness upon the problem of what use he should make of these facts of which he had been appointed guardian. He decided against telling Joe Ellison — at least he would not tell him yet. He recalled the rumors of Joe Ellison's repressed volcano of a temper; if Joe Ellison should learn how he had been defrauded, all the man's vital forces would be instantly transformed into destructive, vengeful rage that would spare no one and count no cost. The result would doubtless be tragedy, with no one greatly served, and with Joe very likely back in prison. If he himself should go out to give Old Jimmie his deserts, his action would be just good powder wasted — it likewise would serve no constructive purpose. Larry realized that it is only human nature for a wronged man to wish for and attempt revenge; but that in the economy of life revenge has no value, serves no purpose; that it usually only makes a bad situation worse.

A tremendous wrong had been done here, a wrong which showed a malignant, cunning, patient mind. But as Larry finally saw the matter, the point for first consideration was not the valueless satisfaction of making the guilty man suffer, but was to try to restore to the victims some part of those precious things of which they had been unconsciously robbed.

And then Larry had what seemed to him an inspiration: his inspiration being only a sane thought, and what the Duchess, though she had not pointed the way to him, had thought he would do. Maggie was the important person in this situation! — Maggie whose life was just beginning, and whose nature he still believed to be plastic! Not Joe Ellison or Old Jimmie Carlisle, who had almost lived out their lives and whose natures were now settled into what they would be until the end. By playing upon the finer elements in Maggie's character he had all but succeeded in rousing to dominance that best nature which existed within her. He would privately tell Maggie the truth, and tell only her and leave the using of that knowledge to her alone. The shock of that knowledge, the effect of its revelations upon her, together with the responsibility of what she should do with this information, might be just the final forces necessary to make Maggie break away from all that she had been and swing over to all that he believed she might be.

Yes, that was the thing to do! And he would do it within the next twelve hours; for Dick had told him that Maggie was coming out again to Cedar Crest on the afternoon of the day which was now rousing from its sleep. That is, he would do it if the police or the allies of his one-time friends did not locate him before Maggie came. But of that he had no serious fear; he knew he had made a clean get-away from the Grantham, and that the shrewd Duchess had left no scent by which those bloodhounds of the Police Department could trail her.

Larry did not even try to sleep; he knew it would be of no avail. Back in his own room he sat going over the situation, and his decision. He tingled with the sense of the tremendous power which had been delivered into his hands. Yes, tremendous! But what were going to be Maggie's reactions the moment he told her? — just what would be her course after she knew the truth?

CHAPTER XXX

LARRY undressed, had a bath, shaved, dressed again, and started to work. But that day the most Larry did was abstractedly going through the motions of work. He was completely filled with the situation and its many questions, and with the suspense of waiting for Maggie to come and of how he was going to manage to see her privately.

The meeting, however, proved no difficulty; for Maggie, who arrived at four, had come primarily on Larry's account and she herself maneuvered the encounter. While they were on the piazza, Dick having gone into the house for a fresh supply of cigarettes, and Miss Sherwood being in an animated discussion with Hunt, Maggie said:

"Miss Sherwood, I've never had a real look down at the Sound from the edge of your bluff. Do you mind if Mr. Brandon shows me?"

"Not at all. Tea won't be served for half an hour, so take your time. Have Mr. Brandon show you the view from just the other side of that old rose-bench; that's the best view."

They walked away chatting mechanically until they were in a garden seat behind the rose-bench. The rose-bench was a rather sorry affair, for it had been set out in this exposed place by a former gardener who had forgotten that the direct winds from the Sound are malgracious to roses. However, it screened the two, and was far enough removed so that ordinary tones would not carry to the house.

"Did your grandmother get you word about the police?" Maggie asked with suppressed excitement as soon as they were seated.

"Yes. She came out here about midnight."

"Then why, while you still had time, did n't you get farther away from New York than this?"

"If I'm to be caught, I'm to be caught; in the meantime, this is as safe a place as any other for me. Besides, I wanted to have at least one more talk with you — after something new grandmother told me about you."

"Something new about me?" echoed Maggie, startled by his grave tone. "What?"

"About your father," he said, watching closely for the effect upon her of his revelations.

"What about my father? What's he been doing that I don't know about?"

"You do not know a single thing that your father has done."

"What!"

"Because you do not know who your father is."

"What!" she gasped.

"Listen, Maggie. What I'm going to tell you may seem unbelievable, but you've got to believe it, because it's the truth. I can see that you have proofs if you want proofs. But you can accept what I tell you as absolute facts. You are by birth a very different person from what you believe yourself. Your father is not Jimmie Carlisle. And your mother —"

"Larry!" She tensely gripped his arm.

"Your mother was of a good family. I imagine something like Miss Sherwood's kind — though not so rich and not having such social standing. She died when you were born. She never knew what your father's business actually was; he passed for a country gentleman. He was about the smoothest and biggest crook of his time, and a straight crook if there is such a thing."

"Larry!" she breathed.

"He kept this gentleman-farmer side of his life and his marriage entirely hidden from his crook acquaintances; that is, from all except one whom he trusted as his most loyal friend. Before you were old enough to remember, he was tripped up and sent away on a twenty-year sentence."

"And he's — he's still in prison?" whispered Maggie.

Larry did not heed the interruption. "He had developed the highest kind of ambition for you. He wanted you to grow up a fine simple woman like your mother — something like Miss Sherwood. He did not want you ever to know the sort of life he had known; and he did not want you to be handicapped by the knowledge that you had a crook for a father. He still had intact your mother's fortune, a small one, but an honest one. So he put you and the money in the hands of his trusted friend, with the instructions that you were to be brought up as the girls of the nicest families are brought up, and believing yourself an orphan."

"That friend of his, Larry?" she whispered tensely.

"Jimmie Carlisle."

"O—oh!"

"I don't know what Jimmie Carlisle's motives were for what he has done. Perhaps to get your money, perhaps some grudge against your father, which he was afraid to show while your father was free, for your father was always his master. But Old Jimmie has brought you up exactly contrary to the orders he received. If revenge was Old Jimmie's motive, his cunning, cowardly brain could not have conceived a more diabolical revenge, one that would hurt your father more. Till a few years ago, when word was sent to your father that Old Jimmie was dead, Jimmie regularly wrote your father about the success of his plan, about how splendidly you were developing and getting on with the best people. And your father — I knew him in prison — now believes you have grown up into exactly the kind of young woman he planned."

"Larry!" she choked in a numbed voice. "Larry!"

"Your father is now as happy as it is possible for him to be, for he has lived for years and still lives in the belief that his great dream, the only big thing left for him to do, has come to pass: that somewhere out in the world is his daughter, grown into a nice, simple, wholesome young woman, with a clean, wholesome life before her. And though she is the one thing in all the world to him, he never intends to see her again for fear that his seeing her might somehow result in an accident that would destroy her happy ignorance. Maggie, can you conceive the tremendous meaning to your father of what he believes he has created? And can you conceive the tremendous difference between the dream he lives upon, and the reality?"

She was white, staring, wilted. For once all the defiance, self-confidence, bravado, melted out of her, and she was just an appalled and frightened young girl.

After a moment she managed to repeat the question Larry had ignored: "Is my real father — still in prison?"

"You'd like to see your real father?" he asked her.

"I think — I'd like to have a glimpse of him," she breathed.

Larry, just before this, had noted Joe Ellison in his blue overalls and wide straw hat cleaning out a bank of young dahlias a distance up the bluff. He now took Maggie's arm and guided her in that direction.

"See that man there working among the dahlias? — the man who once brought you a bunch of roses? Joe Ellison is his name. He's the man I've been talking about — your father."

He felt her quivering under his hand for a moment, and heard her breath come in swift, spasmodic pants. He was wondering what was the effect upon her of this climax of his revelation, when she whispered:

"Do you suppose — I can speak — to my father?"

"Of course. He likes all young women. And I told you that he and I were close friends."

"Then — come on." She arose, clinging to him, and drew him after her. Halfway to Joe she breathed: "You please say something first. Anything."

He recognized this as the appeal of one whose faculties were reeling. There had never been any attempt here at Cedar Crest to conceal Joe Ellison's past, and in Larry's case there had been only such concealment as might help his evasion of his dangers. And so Larry remarked as Joe Ellison took his wide hat off his white hair and stood bareheaded before them:

"Joe, Miss Cameron knows who I really am, and about my having been in Sing Sing; and I 've just told her about our having been friends there. Also I told her about your having a daughter. It interested her and she asked me if she could n't talk to you, so I brought her over."

Larry stood aside and tensely watched this meeting between father and daughter. Joe bowed slightly, and with a dignified grace that overalls and over fifteen years of prison could not take from one who during his early and middle manhood had been known as the perfection of the finished gentleman. His gray eyes warmed with appreciation of the young figure before him, just as Larry had seen them grow bright watching the young figures disporting in the Sound.

"It is very gracious for a young woman like you, Miss Cameron," he said in a voice of grave courtesy, "to be interested enough in an old man like me to want to talk with him."

Maggie made the supreme effort of her life to keep herself in hand. "I wanted to talk to you because of something Mr. Brainard told me about — about your having a daughter."

Larry felt that this was too sacred a scene for him to intrude upon. "Would you mind excusing me," he said; "there are some calculations I 've got to rush out" — and he returned to the bench on which they had been sitting and pretended to busy himself over a pocket notebook.

While Larry had been speaking and moving away, Maggie had swiftly been appraising her father. His gray eyes were direct as against the furtiveness of Jimmie's;

his mouth had a firm kindliness as against the wrinkled cunning of Jimmie's; his bearing was erect, self-possessed, as against Jimmie's bent, shuffling carriage. Maggie felt no swift-born daughter love for this stranger who was her father. The turmoil of her discovery filled her too completely to admit a full-grown affection; but she thrilled with the sense of the vast difference between her supposed father and this her real father.

In the meantime her father had spoken. Joe would have been more reserved with men or with older women; but with this girl, so much the sort of girl he had long dreamed about, his reserve vanished without resistance, and in its place was a desire to talk to this beautiful creature who came out of the world which the big white house represented.

"I have a daughter, yes," he said. "But Larry — Mr. Brainard perhaps I should say — has likely told you all there is to tell."

"I'd like to hear it from you, please — if you don't mind."

"There's really not much to tell," he said. "You know what I was and what happened. When I went to prison my daughter was too young to remember me — less than two years old. I did n't want her ever to be drawn into the sort of life that had been mine, or be the sort of woman that a girl becomes who gets into that life. And I did n't want her ever to have the stigma, and the handicap, of her knowing and the world knowing that her father was a convict. You can't understand it fully, Miss Cameron, but perhaps you can understand a little how disgraced you would feel, what a handicap it would be, if your father were a convict. I had a good friend I could trust. So I turned my daughter over to him, to be brought up with no knowledge of my existence, and with every reasonable advantage that a nice girl should have. I guess that's all, Miss Cameron."

"This friend — what was his name?"

"Carlisle — Jimmie Carlisle. But his name could never have meant anything to you. Besides, he's dead now."

Maggie forced herself on. "Your plan — it turned out all right? And you — you are happy?"

"Yes." In the sympathetic atmosphere which this young girl's presence created for him, Joe's emotions flowed into words more freely than ever before in the company of a human being. Though he was answering her, what he was really doing was rather just letting his heart use its long-silent voice, speak its exultant dream and belief.

"Somewhere out in the world — I don't know where, and I don't want to know — my daughter has now grown into a wholesome, splendid young woman!" he said in a vibrant voice. Brooding in solitude so long upon his careful plan that he believed could not fail, had made the keen Joe Ellison less suspicious concerning it than he otherwise would have been — perhaps had made him a bit daffy on this one subject. "I have saved my daughter from all the grime she might have known, and which might have soiled her, and even pulled her down if I had n't thought out in good time my plan to protect her. And of course I am happy!" he exulted. "I have done the best thing that it was possible for me to do, the thing which I wanted most to do! Instead of what she might have been, I have as a daughter just such a nice girl as you are — just about your own age — though, of course, she has n't your money, your social position, and naturally not quite the advantages you have had. Of course I'm happy!"

"You're — you're sure she's all that?"

Again his words were as much a statement aloud to himself of his constant dream as they were a direct answer to Maggie. "Of course! There was enough money — the plan was in the hands of a friend who knew how to handle such a thing — she's never known anything but the very best surroundings—and until she was fourteen I had regular reports on how wonderfully she was progressing. You see my friend had had her legally adopted by a splendid family, so there's no doubt about everything being for the best."

"And you" — Maggie drove herself on — "don't you ever want to see her?"

"Of course I do. But at the very beginning I fixed things so I could not; so that I would not even know where she is. Removed temptation from myself, you see. Don't you see the possible results if I should try to see her? Something might happen that would bring out the truth, and that would ruin her happiness, her career. Don't you see?"

His gray eyes, bright with his great dream, were fixed intently upon Maggie; and yet she felt that they were gazing far beyond her at some other girl . . . at his girl.

"I — I —" she gulped and swayed and would have fallen if he had not been quick to catch her arm.

"You are sick, Miss?" he asked anxiously.

"I — I have been," she stammered, trying to regain control of her faculties. "It's — it's that — and my not eating — and standing in this hot sun. Thank you very much for what you've told me. I'd — I'd better be getting back."

"I'll help you." And very gently, with a firm hand under one arm, he escorted her to the bench where Larry sat scribbling nothings. He then raised his hat and returned to his dahlias.

"Well?" queried Larry when they were alone.

"I can't stand it to stay here and talk to these people," she replied in an agonized whisper. "I must get away from here quick, so that I can think."

"May I come with you?"

"No, Larry — I must be alone. Please, Larry, please get into the house, and manage to fake a telephone message for me, calling me back to New York at once."

"All right." And Larry hurried away. She sat, pale, breathing rapidly, her whole being clenched, staring fixedly out at the Sound. Five minutes later Larry was back.

"It's all arranged, Maggie. I've told the people; they're sorry you've got to go. And Dick is getting his car ready."

She turned her eyes upon him. He had never seen in them such a look. They were feverish, with a dazed, affrighted horror. She clutched his arm.

"You must promise never to tell my father about me!"

"I won't. Unless I have to."

"But you must not! Never!" she cried desperately. "He thinks I'm — Oh, don't you understand? If he were to learn what I really am, it would kill him. He must keep his dream. For his sake he must never find out, he must keep on thinking of me just the same. Now, you understand?"

Larry slowly nodded.

Her next words were dully vibrant with stricken awe. "And it means that I can never have him for my father! Never! And I think — I'd — I'd like him for a father! Don't you see?"

Again Larry nodded. In this entirely new phase of her, a white-faced, stricken, shivering girl, Larry felt a poignant sympathy for her the like of which had never tingled through him in her conquering moods. Indeed Maggie's situation was opening out into great human problems such as neither he nor any one else had ever foreseen!

"There comes Dick," she whispered. "I must do my best to hold myself together. Good-bye, Larry."

A minute later, Larry just behind her, she was crossing the lawn on Dick's arm, explaining her weakness and pallor by the sudden dizziness which had come upon her in consequence of not eating and of being in the hot sun.

CHAPTER XXXI

LARRY was far more deeply moved this time when Maggie drove away with Dick than on that former occasion when he had tried to play with adroitness upon her psychological reactions. Now he knew that her very world was shaken; that her soul was stunned and reeling; that she was fighting with all her strength for a brief outward composure.

He had loved her for months, but he had never so loved her as in this hour when all her artificial defenses had been battered down and she had been just a bewildered, agonized girl, with just the emotions and first thoughts that any other normal girl would have had under the same circumstances. His great desire had been to be with her, to comfort her, help her; but he realized that she had been correct in her instinct to be by herself for a while, to try to comprehend it all, to try to think her way out.

When Maggie was out of sight he excused himself from having tea, left Hunt and Miss Sherwood upon the veranda, and sought his study. But though he had neglected his work the whole day, he now gave it no attention. He sat at his desk and thought of Maggie: tried to think of what she was going to do. Her situation was so complicated with big elements which she would have to handle that he could not foretell just what her course would be. It was a terrific situation for a young woman, who was after all just a very young girl, to face alone. But there was nothing for him but to wait for news from her. And she had not said even that she would ever let him hear.

While he considered these matters he had risen and paced the room. Once he had paused at a French window which opened upon a side veranda, and had seen below him a few yards away Joe Ellison, whose interest in his flowers had established his workday from sunrise to sunset. Joe Ellison had been pulling tiny weeds that were daring to attempt to get a start in a rose-garden. Larry's mind had halted a moment upon Joe. Here at least was a contented man: one who, no matter what happened, would remain in ignorance of possibly great events which would intimately concern him. Then Larry had left the window and had returned to his thoughts of Maggie.

But Larry's thoughts were not to remain exclusively with Maggie for long. Shortly after six Judkins entered and announced that a man was at the door with a message. The man had refused to come in, saying he was only a messenger and was in a hurry; and had refused to give Judkins the message, saying that it was verbal. Thinking that some word had come from his grandmother, or possibly even from Maggie, Larry went out upon the veranda. Waiting for him was a nondescript man he did not know.

"Mr. Brandon, sir?" asked the man.

"Yes. You have a message for me?"

Before the man could reply, there came a shout from the shrubbery beyond the drive:

"Grab him, Smith! He's the man!"

Instantly Smith's steely arms were about Larry, pinning his elbows to his sides, and a man broke from the shrubbery and hurried toward the house. Instinctively Larry started to struggle, but he ceased as he recognized the man coming up the steps. It was Gavegan. Larry realized that he had been shrewdly trapped, that resistance would serve no end, and the next moment handcuffs were upon his wrists.

"Well, Brainard," gloated Gavegan, "we've landed you at last!"

"So it seems, Gavegan."

"You thought you was damned clever, but I guess you know now you ain't one, two, three!"

"Oh, I knew how clever you are, Gavegan," Larry responded dryly, "and that you'd get me sooner or later if I hung around."

As a matter of fact Larry's capture, which was as unspectacular as his escape had been strenuous, was the consequence of no cleverness at all. Larry had said to Barney Palmer the night before that he knew who Barney's sucker was; and Barney had passed this information along to Chief Barlow. "Follow every clue; luck may be with you and one of the clues may turn up what you want": —this is in substance an unwritten rule of routine procedure which effects those magnificent police solutions which are presented as more mysterious than the original mystery — for it is well for the public to believe that its police officers are unfailingly more clever than its criminals. Barlow had done some routine thinking: if Larry Brainard knew Dick Sherwood was the sucker, then watching Dick Sherwood might possibly reveal the whereabouts of Larry Brainard. Barlow had passed this tip along to Gavegan. Gavegan had grumbled to himself that it was only a thousand to one shot; but luck had been with him, and his long shot had won.

Miss Sherwood, Hunt behind her, had been drawn by the sound of voices around to the side of the veranda where stood the four men. "What are you doing?" she now sharply demanded of Gavegan.

"Don't like to make any unpleasant scene, Miss Sherwood, but I've gotta tell you that this so-called Brandon is a well-known crook." Gavegan enjoyed few things more than astounding people with unpleasant facts. "His real name is Brainard; he's done time, and now he's wanted by the New York police for a tough job he pulled."

"I knew all that long ago," said Miss Sherwood.

"Eh — what?" stammered Gavegan.

"Mr. Brainard told me all that the first time I saw him."

"Hello, Gavegan," said Hunt, stepping forward.

"Well, I'll be — if you ain't that crazy —" Again the ability to express himself coherently and with restraint failed Gavegan. "If you ain't that painter that lived down at the Duchess's!"

"Right, Gavegan — as a detective always should be. And Larry Brainard was then, and is now, my friend."

Miss Sherwood again spoke up sharply. "Mr. Gavegan —if that is your name —you will please take those foolish things off Mr. Brainard's wrists."

Gavegan had been cheated out of creating a sensation. That discomfiture perhaps made him even more dogged than he was by nature.

"Sorry, Miss, but he's charged with having committed a crime and is a fugitive from justice, and I can't."

"I'll be his security. Take them off."

"Sorry to refuse you again, Miss. But he's a dangerous man — got away once before. My orders is to take no risks that'll give him another chance for a get-away."

Miss Sherwood turned to Larry. "I'll go into town with you, and so will Mr. Hunt. I'll see that you get bail and a good lawyer."

"Thank you, Miss Sherwood," Larry said. "Gavegan, I guess we're ready to start."

"Not just yet, Brainard. Sorry, Miss Sherwood, but we've got a search warrant for your place. We just want to have a look at the room Brainard used. No telling what kind of crooked stuff he's been up to. And to make the search warrant O.K. I had it issued in this county and brought along a county officer to serve it. Show it to the lady, Smith."

"I have no desire to see it, Mr. Gavegan. I have more interest in watching you while you go through my things." And giving Gavegan a look which made an unaccustomed flush run up that officer's thick neck and redden his square face, she led the way into Larry's study. "This is the room where Mr. Brainard works," she said. "Through that door is his bedroom. Everything here except his clothing is my property. I shall hold you rigidly responsible for any disorder you may create or any damage you may do. Now you may go ahead."

"Let's have all your keys, Brainard," Gavegan choked out.

Larry handed them over. With Miss Sherwood, Hunt, and Larry looking silently on, the two men began their examination. They began with the papers on Larry's desk and in its drawers; and in all his life Gavegan had not been so considerate in a search as he now was with Miss Sherwood's blue eyes coldly upon him. They unlocked cabinets, scrutinized their contents, shook out books, examined the backs of pictures, took up rugs; then passed into Larry's bedroom. Miss Sherwood made no move to follow the officers into that more intimate apartment, and the other two watchers remained with her.

A minute passed. Then Gavegan reëntered, a puzzled, half-triumphant look on his red face, holding out a square of paint-covered canvas.

"Found this thing in Brainard's chiffonier. What the he— I mean what's it doing out here?"

There was not an instant's doubt as to what the thing was. Larry started, and Hunt started, and Miss Sherwood started. But it was Miss Sherwood who first spoke.

"Why, it's a portrait of Miss Cameron, in costume! And painted by Mr. Hunt!" In amazement she turned first upon Larry and upon Hunt. "When did you ever paint her portrait, when you did not meet Miss Cameron till you met her here? And, Mr. Brainard, how do you come to possess Miss Cameron's portrait?"

It was Gavegan who spoke up promptly, and not either of the two suddenly discomfited men. And Gavegan instantly sensed in the situation a chance to get even for the humiliation his self-esteem had just suffered.

"Miss Cameron nothing! Her real name is Maggie

Carlisle, and she used to live at a dump of a pawnshop down on the East Side run by Brainard's grandmother. Brainard knew her there, and so did Mr. Hunt."

"But—but—" gasped Miss Sherwood—"she's been coming out here as Maggie Cameron!"

"I tell you your Maggie Cameron is Maggie Carlisle!" said Gavegan gloatingly. "I've known her for years. Her father is Old Jimmie Carlisle, a notorious crook. And she's mixed up right now with her father and some others in a crooked game. And Brainard here used to be sweet on her, and probably still is, and if he's been letting her come here, without telling you who she is — well, I guess you know the answer. Did n't I tell you, Miss, that give me a chance and I'd turn up something against this guy Brainard!"

Miss Sherwood's face was white, but set with grim accusation that was only waiting to pronounce swift judgment. "Mr. Hunt, is it true that Miss Cameron is this Maggie Carlisle the officer mentions, and that you knew it all the while?"

"Yes —" began the painter.

"Don't blame him, Miss Sherwood," Larry interrupted. "He did n't tell you because I begged him not to as a favor to me. Blame me for everything."

Her judgment upon Hunt was pronounced with cold finality, her eyes straight into Hunt's: "Whatever may have been Mr. Hunt's motives, I unalterably hold him to blame."

She turned upon Larry. The face which he had only seen in gracious moods was as inflexibly stern as a prosecuting attorney's.

"We're going to go right to the bottom of this, Mr. Brainard. You too have known all along that this Miss Cameron was really the Maggie Carlisle this officer speaks of?"

"Yes."

"And you have known all along that she was the daughter of this notorious criminal, Old Jimmie Carlisle?"

The impulse surged up in Larry to tell the newly learned truth about Maggie. But he remembered Maggie's injunction that the truth must never be known. He checked his revelation just in time.

"Yes."

"And is it true that Maggie Carlisle is herself what is known as a crook? — or has had crooked inclinations or plans?"

"It's like this, Miss Sherwood —"

"A direct answer, please!"

"Yes."

"And is it true, as this officer has suggested, that you were in love with her yourself?"

"Yes."

"You are aware of my brother's infatuation for her? That he has asked her to marry him?"

"Yes."

Her voice now sounded more terrible to Larry. "I took you in to give you a chance. And your repayment has been that, knowing all these things, you have kept silent and let me and my brother be imposed upon by a swindling operation. And who knows, since you admit that you love the girl, that you have not been a partner in the conspiracy from the first!"

"That's exactly the idea, Miss!" put in Gavegan.

Larry had foreseen many possible wrong turns which his plan might take, but he was appalled by the utter unexpectedness of the actual disaster. And yet he recognized that the evidence justified Miss Sherwood's judgment of him. It all made him seem an ingrate and a swindler.

For the moment Larry was so overwhelmed that he made no attempt to speak. And since for once Gavegan was content merely to gloat over his triumph, there was stiff silence in the room until Miss Sherwood said in the cold voice of a judge after a jury has brought in a verdict of guilty:

"Of course, if you think there is anything you may say for yourself, Mr. Brainard, you now have the chance to say it."

"I have much to say, but I can't blame you if you refuse to believe most of it," Larry said desperately, fighting for what seemed his last chance. "I loved Maggie Carlisle. I believed she had splendid qualities. Only she was dominated by the twisted ideas Old Jimmie Carlisle had planted in her. I wanted to eradicate those twisted ideas, and make her good qualities her ruling ones. But she did n't believe in me. She thought me a soft-head, a police stool, a squealer. Then I had to disappear; you know all about that. Not till I had been with you for several weeks did I learn that she was being used in a swindling scheme against Dick.

"I did think of telling you or Dick. But my greatest interest was to awaken that better person I believed to be in her; and I knew that the certain result of my exposing her to you would be for me to lose the last bit of influence I had with her, and for her to pass right on to another enterprise of similar character. So the idea came to me that if I did n't expose her, but caused her to be received with every courtesy by her intended victims, the effect upon her would be that she would feel a revulsion for what she was doing and she would come to her best senses. I told this to Mr. Hunt; that's why he agreed not to give her away. And another point, though frankly this was not so important to me: it seemed to me that a good hard jolt might be just what was needed to make Dick take life more seriously, and I saw in this affair a chance for Dick to get just the jolt he needed.

"That's all, Miss Sherwood. Except that I have seen signs which make me believe that what I figured would happen to Maggie Carlisle have begun to happen to her."

"Bunk!" snorted Gavegan.

"I know that part of what he says is true," put in Hunt.

Miss Sherwood ignored Hunt and his remark. The look of controlled wrath which she held upon Larry did not change. Larry recognized that his statement had sounded most implausible. Miss Sherwood in her indignation considered only that her kindness had been betrayed, her hospitality outraged, and that those she had accepted as friends had sought to trick her family in the worst way she could conceive; and she spoke accordingly.

"If that is the best Mr. Brainard has to say for himself, Mr. Gavegan, you may take him with you, and without any interference from me. I ask only that you take him out of the house at once."

With that she moved from the room, not looking again at either Hunt or Larry. For a brief space there was silence, while Gavegan let his triumph feed gloatingly upon the sight of his prisoner.

This brief silence was broken by a low, strange sound, like a human cry quickly repressed, that seemed to come from just outside the French windows.

"What was that?" Larry asked quickly.

"I did n't hear anything," said Gavegan whose senses had been thoroughly concentrated upon his triumph.

"I did," said Hunt. "On the veranda."

"We'll see. Watch him —" to the county officer; and Gavegan followed Hunt to the French windows and looked out. "No one on the veranda, and no one in sight," he reported. "You fellows must have been dreaming."

He returned and faced Larry. "I guess you'll admit. Brainard, that I've got you for keeps this time."

"Then suppose we be starting for Headquarters." Larry responded.

Hunt moved to Larry's side. "I'll just trail along after you, Larry. Anyhow, this does n't seem to be any place for me."

A few minutes afterwards Larry was in a car beside Gavegan, speeding away from Cedar Crest toward the city. Larry's thoughts were the gloomiest he had entertained since he had come out of Sing Sing months before with his great dream. All that he had counted on had gone wrong. He was in the hands of the police, and he knew how hard the police would be. He had incurred the hostility of Miss Sherwood and had lost what had seemed a substantial opportunity to start his career as an honest man. The only item of his great plan in which he did not seem to have failed completely was Maggie. And he did not know what Maggie was going to do.

CHAPTER XXXII

WHEN Maggie drove away with Dick from Cedar Crest — this was an hour before Gavegan descended out of the blue upon Larry and two hours before he rode triumphantly away with his captive — she was the most dazed and disillusioned young creature who had ever set out confidently to conquer the world. Courage, confidence, quickness of wit, all the qualities on which she had prided herself, were now entirely gone, and she was just a white, limp figure that wanted to run away: a weak figure in which swirled thoughts almost too spasmodically powerful for so weakened a vessel not to be shattered under their wild strain: thoughts of her amazingly discovered real father — of how she was the very contradiction of her father's dream — of Larry — of the cunning Jimmie Carlisle whom till this day she had believed her father — of Barney Palmer.

So agitated was she with these gyrating thoughts that she was not conscious that Dick had stopped the car on the green roadside until he had taken her hand and had begun to speak. The happy, garrulous, unobservant Dick had not noticed anything out of the way with her more than a pallor which she had explained away as being due to nothing more than a bit of temporary dizziness. And so for the second time Dick now poured out his love to her and asked her to marry him.

"Don't, Dick — please!" she interrupted him. "I can't marry you! Never!"

"What!" cried the astounded Dick. "Maggie — why not?"

"I can't. That's final. And don't make me talk to you now, Dick — please! I cannot!"

His face, so fresh and happy the moment before, became gray and lined with pain. But he silently swung the car back into the road.

She forgot him utterly in what was happening within her. As they rode on, she forced herself to think of what she should do. She saw herself as the victim of much, and as guilty of much. And then inspiration came upon her, or perhaps it was merely a high frenzy of desperation, and she saw that the responsibility for the whole situation was upon her alone; she saw it as her duty, the rôle assigned her, to try to untangle alone this tangled situation, to try to measure out justice to every one.

First of all, as she had told Larry, her father's dream of her must remain unbroken. Whatever she did, she must do nothing that might possibly be a sharp blow to the conception of his daughter which were the roots and trunk and flowering branches of his present happiness. . . . And then came a real inspiration! She would, in time, make herself into the girl he believed her — make his dream the truth! She would get rid of Old Jimmie and Barney — would cut loose from everything pertaining to her former life — would disappear and live for a year or two in the kind of environment in which he believed he had placed her — and would reappear and claim him for her father! And for his own sake, he should never know the truth. Two years more and he should have the actuality, where he now had only the dream!

But before she was free to enter upon this plan, before she could vanish out of the knowledge of all who had known her, there was a great duty to Larry Brainard which she must discharge. He was hunted by the police, he was hunted by his former pals. And he was in his predicament fundamentally because of her. Therefore, it was her foremost duty to clear Larry Brainard.

Yes, she would do that first! Somehow! . . .

She was considering this problem of how she was to clear Larry, who had tried to awaken her, who had shielded her, who loved her, when Dick slowed his car down in front of the Grantham and helped her out. As he said a subdued good-bye and was stepping back into his car, an impulse surged up into her — an impulse of this different Maggie whose birth was being attended by such bewildering emotions and decisions.

"Dick, won't you please come up for just a little while?"

Three minutes later they were in her sitting-room. Cap in hand Dick awaited her words in the misery of silence. Her look was drawn, but direct.

"Back in the road, Dick, you asked me why I could n't marry you. I asked you up here to tell you."

"Yes?" he queried dully.

"One reason is that, though I like you, I don't like you that way. The more important reason to you is that I am a fraud."

"A fraud!" he exclaimed incredulously.

It had come to her, as she was leaving the car, that the place to start her new life was to start right, or quit right, with Dick. "A fraud," she repeated — "an impostor. There is no Maggie Cameron. I am born of no good family from the West. I have no money. I have always lived in New York — most of the time down on the East Side. I used to work in a Fifth Avenue millinery shop. Till three months ago I sold cigarettes in one of the big hotels."

"What of that!" cried Dick.

"That is the nicest part of what I have to tell you," she continued relentlessly. "My supposed relatives, Jimmie Carlisle and Barney Palmer, are no relatives at all, but are two clever confidence men. I have been in with them, working on a scheme they have framed. Everything I have seemed to be, everything I have done, even this expensive apartment, have all been parts of that scheme. The idea of that scheme was to swindle some rich man out of a lot of money — through my playing on his susceptibilities."

"Maggie!" he gasped.

"More concretely, the idea was to trick some rich man into falling in love with me, to get him to propose, then to have me confess that I was already married, but to a man who would give me a divorce if he were paid enough. The rich man would then drive a bargain with my supposed husband, pay over a lot of money — after which Barney, Old Jimmie, and I would disappear with our profits."

"Maggie!" he repeated, stupefied with his incredulous amazement. But the unflinching gaze she held upon him convinced him she was speaking the truth. "Then, if that was your game, why are you telling me now? Why did n't you say 'yes' when I proposed a week ago? I would have fallen for the game; you would have succeeded."

Not till that moment did Maggie realize the full truth; not till then did she realize the solid influence Larry Brainard had been in the background of her life all these months.

"I did n't go through with it because of Larry Brainard."

"Larry Brainard!" His astonishment increased. "You know Larry Brainard, then?"

"I've known him for several years."

"And you've been coming out, and he's been pretending not to know you! Of course I knew what Larry Brainard has been. But is he in this, too?"

"No. He's exactly what you think him. From the start he's been trying to keep me out of this. He was behind my coming to your house; he's told me so. His reason for getting me there was his belief that my being treated by you and your sister as I was would make me ashamed of myself and make me want to quit what I was doing. And I think — I think he was right — partly."

"And Larry — he's the reason you're telling me now?"

"I think so. But there are other reasons." Making a clean breast of things though she was, she felt she dared not trust Dick with the secret of her father. "I — I wanted to clear things up as far as I was responsible. That's one reason I'm telling you. There was the chance you might sometime find out that Larry had known me and suspect him; I wanted you to know the truth of what he'd really done. And I wanted to tell you the truth about myself, so you'd despise and forget me, instead of perhaps carrying around romantic delusions about me after I've gone. And there's another reason. I'd like to tell you — for you've been everything that's fine to me — if it won't offend you."

"Go on," he said huskily.

"Barney Palmer picked you out as the victim — you did n't know you were being picked out — because he said that you were an easy mark. That you took things for exactly what they pretended to be, and did n't care what you did with your money. That you never would settle down into a responsible person. I'm telling you all this, Dick, because I don't want you to be what Barney said."

Dick slumped into a chair, at last beaten down by this cumulative revelation. He buried his face in his hands and his panting breath was convulsive with unuttered sobs. Maggie looked down upon the young boy, with pity, remorse, and an increasing recognition of the widespread suffering she had wrought.

"To think that this has all been horrible make-believe!" he at last groaned. "That all the while I've been looked on as just a young fool who would always remain a fool!"

Maggie, in her sense of guilt, was helpless to make any reply that would soften his agony; and for a space neither spoke.

Presently Dick stood suddenly up. His face was still marked by suffering, but somehow it seemed to have grown older without losing its youth. There was a new blaze of determination in the direct look he held on Maggie.

"You say you have never loved me?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "But I've told you that I've always liked you."

"Larry Brainard's doing what he has kept on doing for you — that means that he loves you, does n't it?" he pressed on.

"He has told me so."

"And you love him?"

"What difference does that make? — since I am going away as soon as I get everything I'm wholly or partly responsible for cleared up."

"If Larry Brainard has known you for a long while, then how about Barney Palmer and Jimmie Carlisle?"

"They've known me as long, or longer."

"Then you must have all known each other?"

"Yes. Years ago Larry worked with Barney and Jimmie Carlisle."

"What was the attitude of those two toward Larry, when he was trying to balk them by making you give up the plan?"

"They hated him. They are the cause — especially Barney — of all of Larry's trouble with the police and with the old crowd he's quit. To try to clear Larry, that's the most important thing I'm going to try to do."

"And that's where you've got to let me help you!" Dick cried with sudden energy. "Larry's been a mighty good friend to me — he's tried to head me right — and I owe him a lot. And I'd like a chance to show that Barney Palmer I'm not going to keep on being the eternal fool he sized me up to be!"

Maggie was startled by this swift transformation. "Why — why, Dick!" she breathed.

"What's your plan to clear Larry?"

"I had n't got so far as to have a clear plan. I had only just realized that there had to be a plan. But since they have set the police on Larry, it came to me that the idea behind any plan would be for the police to really capture Barney and Jimmie Carlisle — get them out of Larry's way."

"That's it!" Dick Sherwood had a mind which, given an interesting stimulus, could work swiftly; and it worked swiftly now. "They were planning to trim me. Let's use that plan you outlined to me — use it to-night. You can tell them some story which will make immediate action seem necessary and we'll all get together this evening. I'll play my part all right—don't you worry about me! I'll come with a roll of money that I'll dig up somewhere, and it'll be marked money. When it's passed — bingo! — a couple of detectives that we'll have planted to watch the proceedings will step right up and nab the two!"

She was taken aback by the very idea of him, the victim, after her confession, throwing his lot in with her. "Why, Dick" — she stammered — "to think of you offering to do such a thing!"

"I owe that much to Larry Brainard," he declared. "And — and I owe that much to your desire to help set him straight. Well, what about my plan?"

Since he seemed eager to lend himself to it, it seemed to her altogether wonderful, and she told him so. They discussed details for several minutes, for there was much to be done and it had all to be done most adroitly. It was agreed that he should come at ten o'clock, when the stage would all be set.

As he was leaving to attend to his part of the play, a precautionary idea flashed upon Maggie.

"Better telephone me just before you come. Something may have happened to change our plans."

"All right — I'll telephone. Just keep your nerve."

With that he hurried out. At about the time he left, Larry was leaving Cedar Crest in handcuffs beside the burly and triumphant Gavegan, and believing that the power he had sought to exercise was now effectually at an end. He was out of it. In his despondency it was not granted him to see that the greatest thing which he could do was already done; that he had set in motion all the machinery of what had taken place and what was about to take place; that all the figures in the action of the further drama of that night were to act as they were to do primarily because of promptings which came from him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Dick's departure left Maggie to think alone upon an intricate and possibly dangerous interplay of characters in which she had cast herself for the chief rôle, which might prove a sacrificial rôle for her. She quickly perceived that Dick's plan, clever as it might be, would bring about, in the dubious event of its success, only one of the several happenings which had to come to pass if she were to clear her slate before her disappearance.

Dick's plan was good; but it would only get rid of Barney and Old Jimmie. It would only rid Larry of such danger as they represented; it would only be revenge upon them for the evil they had done. And, after all, revenge helped a man forward but very little. There would still remain, even in the event of the success of Dick's plan, the constant danger to Larry from the police hunt, instigated by Chief Barlow's vindictive determination to send Larry back to prison for his refusal to be a stool-pigeon; and the constant danger from his one-time friends who were hunting him down with deadly hatred as a squealer.

Somehow, if she were to set things right for Larry, she had to maneuver that night's happenings in such a way as to eliminate forever Barlow's persecutions, and eliminate forever the danger to Larry from his friends' and their hirelings' desire for vengeance upon a supposed traitor.

Maggie thought rapidly, elaborating on Dick's plan. But what Maggie did was not so much the result of sober thought as of the inspiration of a desperate, hardly pressed young woman; but then, after all, what we call inspiration is only thought geared to an incredibly high speed. First of all, she got rid of that slow-witted, awesome supernumerary, Miss Grierson, who might completely upset the delicate action of the stage by a dignified entrance at the wrong moment and with the wrong cue. Next she called up Chief Barlow at Police Headquarters. Fortunately for her Barlow was still in; for an acrimonious dispute, then in progress and taking much space in the public prints, between him and the District Attorney's office was keeping him late at his desk despite the most autocratic and pleasant of all demands, those of his dinner hour. To him Maggie gave a false name, and told him that she had most important information to communicate at once; to which he growled back that she could give it if she came down at once.

Next she called up Barney, who had been waiting near a telephone in expectation of news of the result of her second visit to the home of Dick Sherwood. To Barney she said that she had the greatest possible news — news which would require immediate action — and that he should be at her suite at nine o'clock prepared to play his part at once in the big proposition that had just developed, and that he should get word to Old Jimmie to follow him in a few minutes.

Within fifteen minutes a taxicab had whirled her down to Police Headquarters and she was in the office where three months earlier Larry had been grilled after his refusal of the license to steal and cheat on the condition that he become a police stool. Barlow, who was alone in the room, looked up with a scowl from a secret report he had secured of the activities of detectives in the District Attorney's office. Although Maggie was pretty and stylishly dressed, Barlow did not rise nor did he remove the big cigar he had been viciously gnawing. It is the tradition of the Police Department, the most thoroughly respected article of its religion, that a woman who is seen in Police Headquarters cannot by any possibility be a lady.

"Well, what's on your chest?" he grunted, not even asking her to be seated.

It was suddenly Maggie's impulse — sprung perhaps out of unconscious memory of what Larry had suffered — to inflict upon herself the uttermost humiliation. So she said:

"I've come here to offer myself as a stool-pigeon."

"What's that?" Barlow exclaimed, startled. It was not often that a swell lady — who of course could n't be a swell (he did not know who Maggie was) — voluntarily walked into his office with such a proposition.

"I can give you some real information about a big game that's being worked up. In fact, I can arrange for you to be present when the game is pulled off, and you can make the arrests."

"Who are the people?" he asked brusquely.

Maggie knew it would be fatal to mention Barney or Old Jimmie, if that story about Barlow's protection contained any truth. Again inspiration, or incredibly swift thinking, came to her aid, and with sure touch she twanged one of Barlow's rawest and most responsive nerves.

"Larry Brainard is behind it all. He's been doing a lot of things on the quiet these last few months. Here is where you can get his whole crowd."

"Larry Brainard!"

Maggie did not yet know what had befallen Larry, and Gavegan had neglected to telephone his Chief of the arrest. Even had Gavegan done so, the large and vague manner in which Maggie had stated the situation would have stirred Barlow's curiosity.

"All right. I'll put a couple of my good men on the case. Where shall I send 'em?"

"A couple of your good men won't do. I want only *one* of your good men — and that man is yourself."

"Me!" growled Barlow. "What kind of floor-walker d'you think I am? I'm too busy!"

"Too busy to take personal charge, and get personal credit, for one of the biggest cases that ever went through this office?"

Maggie had sought only to excite his vanity. But unknowingly she had also appealed to something else in him: his very deep concern in the hostile activities of the District Attorney's office. If this girl told the truth, then here might be his chance to display such devotion to duty as to turn up some such sensational case as would make this investigation from the District Attorney's office seem to the public an unholy persecution and make the chagrined

District Attorney, who was very sensitive to public opinion, think it wiser to drop the whole matter.

"How do I know you're not trying to string me? — or get me out of the way of something bigger? — or hand me the double-cross?"

"I shall be there all the time, and if you don't like the way the thing develops you can arrest me. I suppose you've got some kind of law, with a stiff punishment attached, about conspiracy against an officer."

"Well — give me all the dope, and tell me where I'm to come," he yielded ungraciously.

"I've told you all I am going to tell. All the important 'dope' you'll get first-hand by being present when the thing happens. The place to come is the Hotel Grantham — room eleven-forty-two — at eight-thirty sharp."

To this Barlow grudgingly agreed. He might have exulted inwardly, but he would have shown no outer graciousness if a committee of citizens had handed him a reward of a million dollars and an engrossed testimonial to his unprecedented services. Barlow did not know how to thank any one.

Five minutes after she left Headquarters Maggie was in the back room of the Duchess's pawnshop, which her rapid planning had fixed upon as the next station at which she should stop. She did not waste a moment in coming to the point with the Duchess.

"Red Hannigan is really the most important of Larry's old friends who are out to get him, is n't he?" he asked.

"Yes — in a way. I mean among those who honestly think Larry has turned stool and squealer. He trusted Larry more than any one else — and now he hates Larry more than any one else. Rather natural, since he was two months in the Tombs before he could get bail — because he thinks Larry squealed on him."

"How 's he stand with his crowd?"

"No one higher. They'd all take his word for anything."

"Can you find him at once?" Maggie pursued breathlessly.

That was a trifling question to ask the Duchess; since all the news of her shadowy world came to her ears in some swift obscure manner.

"Yes. If it is necessary."

"It's terribly necessary! If I can't get him, the whole thing may fail!"

"What thing?" demanded the Duchess.

"It might all sound impossibly foolish!" cried the excited, desperate Maggie. "You might tell me so — and discourage me — and I *simply must* go ahead! I feel rather like — like a juggler who's trying for the first time to keep a lot of new things going in the air all at once. But I think there's a chance that I may succeed! I'll tell you just one thing. It all has to do with Larry. I think I may help Larry."

"I'll get Red Hannigan," the Duchess said briefly. "What do you want with him?"

"Have him come to the Hotel Grantham—room eleven-forty-two — at eight-fifteen sharp!"

"He'll be there," said the Duchess.

There followed a swirling taxi-ride back to the Grantham, and a rapid change into her most fetching evening gown (she had not even a thought of dinner) to play her bold part in the drama which she was excitedly writing in her mind and for which she had just engaged her cast. She was on fire with terrible suspense: would the other actors play their parts as she intended they should? — would her complicated drama have the ending she was hoping for?

Had she been in a more composed, matter-of-fact state of mind, this play which she was staging would have seemed the crudest, most impossible melodrama — a thing both too absurd and too dangerous for her to risk. But Maggie was just then living through one of the highest periods of her life; she cared little what happened to her. And it is just such moods that transform and elevate what otherwise would be absurd to the nobly serious; that changes the impossible into the possible; just as an exalted mood or mind is, or was, the primary difference between Hamlet, or Macbeth, or Lear, and any of the forgotten Bowery melodramas of a generation now gone.

She had been dressed for perhaps ten nervous minutes when the bell rang. She admitted a slight, erect, well-dressed, middle-aged man with a lean, thin-lipped face and a cold, hard, conservative eye: a man of the type that you see by the dozens in the better hotels of New York, and seeing them you think, if you think of them at all, that here is the canny president of some fair-sized bank who will not let a client borrow a dollar beyond his established credit, or that here is the shrewd but unobtrusive power behind some great industry of the Middle West.

"I'm Hannigan," he announced briefly. "I know you're Old Jimmie Carlisle's girl. The Duchess told me you wanted me on something big. What's the idea?"

"You want to get Larry Brainard, don't you? — or whoever it was that squealed on you?"

There was a momentary gleam in the hard, gray eyes. "I do."

"That's why you're here. In a little over an hour, if you stay quiet in the background, you'll have what you want."

"You've got a swell-looking lay-out here. What's going to be pulled off?"

"It's not what I might tell you that's going to help you. It's what you hear and see."

"All right," said the thin-lipped man. "I'll pass the questions, since the Duchess told me to do as you said. She's square, even if she does have a grandson who's a stool. I suppose I'm to be out of sight during whatever happens?"

"Yes."

In the room there were two spacious closets, as is not infrequent in the better class of modern hotels; and it had been these two closets which had been the practical starting-point of Maggie's development of Dick Sherwood's proposition. To one of these she led Hannigan.

"You'll be out of sight here, and you'll get every word."

He stepped inside, and she closed the door. Also she took the precaution of locking it. She wished Hannigan to hear, but she wished no such *contretemps* as Hannigan bursting forth and spoiling her play when it had reached only the middle of its necessary action.

Barlow came promptly at half-past eight. He brought news which for a few moments almost completely upset Maggie's delicately balanced structure.

"I know who you are now," he said brusquely. "And part of your game 's cold before you start."

"Why? — What part?"

"Just after you left Headquarters Officer Gavegan showed up. He had this Larry Brainard in tow — had pinched him out on Long Island."

This announcement staggered Maggie; for the moment made all her strenuous planning seem to have lost its purpose. In her normal condition she might either have given up or betrayed her real intent. But just now, in her superexcited state, in which she felt she was fighting desperately for others, she was acting far above her ordinary capacity; and she was making decisions so swift that they hardly seemed to proceed from conscious thought. So Barlow, vigilant watcher of faces that he was, saw nothing unusual in her expression or manner.

"What did you do with him?" she asked.

"Left him with Gavegan — and with Casey, who had just come in. Trailing with Brainard was a swell named Hunt, cussing mad. He was snorting around about being pals with most of the magistrates, and swore he'd have Brainard out on bail inside an hour. But what he does don't make any difference to me. Your proposition seems to me dead cold, since I've already got Brainard, and got him right. I would n't have bothered to have come here at all except for something you let drop about the pals he might have been working with these last few months."

"That's exactly it," she caught him up. "I never thought that you'd catch Larry Brainard here. How could I, when, if you know me as you say, you also know that he and I are in different camps — are fighting each other? What's going to happen here is something that will show you the people Larry Brainard's been mixed up with — that will turn up for you the people you want."

"But what's going to happen?" Barlow demanded.

To this Maggie answered in much the same strain she had used with Hannigan a few minutes earlier. "I told you down at Headquarters that everything that's important you'll learn by being present when the thing actually happened. What I tell you does n't count for much — it might not be true. It's what you see and hear for yourself when things begin to happen. You're to wait in here." She led him to the second large closet and opened the door.

"See here," he demanded, "are you framing something on me?"

"How can I, in a big hotel like this? And even if I were to try, you'd certainly make me pay for it later. Besides, you've got a gun. Please go in quick; I'm expecting the people here any minute. And don't make a sound that might arouse their suspicions and queer everything."

He entered, and she closed the door. So carefully that he did not hear it, she locked the door; no more than in Hannigan's case did she want Barlow to come bungling into a scene before it had reached its climax.

All was now ready for the curtain to rise. Quivering all through she waited for Barney Palmer, whose entrance was to open her drama. She glanced at her wrist-watch which she had left upon the little lacquered writing-table. Ten minutes of nine. Ten more minutes to wait. She felt far more of sickening suspense than ever did any young playwright on the opening night of his first play. For she was more than merely playwright. In her desperate, overwrought determination Maggie had assumed for herself the super-mortal rôle of *dea ex machina*. And in those moments of tense waiting Maggie, who so feverishly loathed all she had been, was not at all sure whether she was going to succeed in her part of goddess from the machine.

At five minutes to nine there was a ring. She gave a little jump at the sound. That was Barney. Though generally when Barney came he used the latch-key which his assumed dear cousinship, and the argued possibility of their being out and thus causing him to wait around in discomfort, Miss Grierson's sense of propriety had unbent far enough to permit him to possess. The truth was, of course, that Barney had desired the key so that he might have most private conferences with Maggie, at any time necessity demanded, without the stolidly conscientious Miss Grierson ever knowing what had happened and being therefore unable to give dangerous testimony.

Maggie crossed and opened the door. But instead of Barney Palmer, it was Larry who stepped in. He quickly closed the door behind him.

"Larry!" she cried startled. "Why—why, I thought the police had you!"

"They did. But Hunt was with me, and he got hold of a magistrate who would have made Hunt a present of the Tombs and Police Headquarters if he had owned them."

"Then you're out on bail?"

"Got out about ten minutes ago. Hunt did n't have any property he could put up as security, so he 'phoned my grandmother. She walked in with an armload of deeds. Why, she must own as much property in New York as the Astor Estate."

"Larry, I'm so glad!" And then, remembering what, according to her plan, was due to begin to happen almost any moment, she exclaimed in dismay: "But, Larry, oh, why did you come here now!"

"I wanted to know — you understand — what you had decided to do after learning about your father. And I wanted to tell you that, after all my great boasts to you, I seem to have failed in every boast. Item one, the police have got me. Item two, since the police have got me, my old pals will also most likely get me. Item three, when I was arrested at Cedar Crest Miss Sherwood learned that I had known you all along and believes I was part of a conspiracy to clean out the family; so she chucked me — and I've lost what I believed my big chance to make good. So, you see, Maggie, it looks as if you were right when you predicted that I was going to fail in everything I said I was going to do."

"Larry—Miss Sherwood believes that!" she breathed. And then she remembered again, and caught his arm with sudden energy. "Larry, you must n't stay here!"

"Why not?"

Her answer was almost identical with one she had given the previous evening. "Because Barney Palmer may be here the next minute!"

His response was in sense also identical. "Then I'll stay right here. There's no one I want to see as much as Barney Palmer. And this time I'll have it out with him!"

Maggie was in consternation at this unexpected twist which was not in the brain-manuscript of her play at all — which indeed threatened to take her play right out of her hands. "Please go, Larry!" she cried desperately. "And please give me a chance! You'll spoil it all if you stay!"

"I'm going to stay right here," was his grim response.

She realized there was no changing him. She glimpsed a closet door behind him, and caught at the chance of saving at least a fragment of her drama.

"Stay, then — but, Larry, please give me a chance to do what I want to do! Please!" By this time she had dragged him across the room and had started to unlock the closet. "Just wait in here — and keep quiet! Please!"

He took the key from her fumbling hands, unlocked the door, and slipped the key into his pocket. "All right — I'll give you your chance," he promised.

He stepped through the door and closed it upon himself, entombing himself in blackness. The next moment the glare of a pocket flash was in his face, blinding him.

"Larry Brainard!" gritted a low voice in the darkness.

Larry could see nothing, but there was no mistaking that voice. "Red Hannigan!" he exclaimed.

"Yes — you damned squealer! And I'm going to finish you off right here!"

The light clicked out, and a pair of lean hands almost closed on Larry's wind-pipe. But Larry caught the wrists of the older man in a grip the other could not break. There was a brief struggle in the blackness of the closet, then the slighter man stood still with his wrists manacled by Larry's hands.

"Evidently you have n't a gun on you, Red, or you would n't have tried this," Larry commented. "Anyhow, you could n't have got away with killing in a big hotel, whether you had strangled me or shot me. I don't blame you for being sore at me, Red — only you've got me all wrong. But you and I are evidently here for the same purpose: to get next to something that's going to happen out in the room. What do you say, Red? — let's suspend hostilities for the present. You've got me where you can follow me, and you can get me any time."

"You bet I'll get you!" declared Hannigan. And then after a few more words an armistice was agreed upon between the two men in the closet and silently, tensely, they stood in the dark awaiting whatever was to happen.

Outside Maggie, that amateur playwright who had tried so desperately to prearrange events, that inexperienced goddess from the machine, stood in a panic of fear and suspense the like of which she had never known.

CHAPTER XXXIV

But when Barney's latch-key slid into the door and Barney, in a smart dinner jacket, came in, Maggie was herself again. Indeed she was better than herself, for there rushed to her support that added power which she had just been despairing of, which carries some people through an hour of crisis, and which may occasionally lift an actor above himself when fortune gives him a difficult yet splendid part which is the great chance of his career.

And Maggie showed to the eye that she was better than her best, for Barney exclaimed the instant he was beside her: "Gee, Maggie, you look like the Queen of Sheba, whoever that dame was! Any guy would fall for you to-night — and fall so hard that he'd break, or go broke!"

But Barney was too eager to await any response. "What's behind the hurry-up call you sent in? Anything broken yet?"

"Something big! But sit down. There's a lot to tell. And I must tell it quick — before my" — she could not force herself to say "father" — "before Old Jimmie comes, and Dick."

"Then Dick's coming?"

"Yes. Things have taken a twist so that everything breaks to-night. But sit down, and I'll tell you everything."

She had noted that the door behind which Larry stood, and to which he had captured the key, was open a bare half-inch. It looked no more suspicious than any closet door that by accident had swung free of its latch, but by deft maneuvering Maggie managed so that Barney sat at the table with his back toward both closets.

"Go to it, Maggie," he urged.

The plan which had swiftly developed from Dick Sherwood's idea required that she should tell much that was the truth and much that was not truth, and required that she should play with every faculty and every attraction she possessed upon Barney's tremendous vanity and upon his jealous admiration of her. She had to make him believe more in her as a pal than ever before; she had to make him want her more as a woman than ever before. And at this moment she felt herself thrillingly equal to this vampire rôle her over-stimulated sense of justice had commanded her to undertake.

"Things have gone great," she began, speaking concisely, yet trying not in this eager brevity to lose the convincing effect that she would be the complete mistress of any enterprise to which she yielded her interest. "Dick Sherwood proposed to me again, and this time I said 'yes.' I saw that he was ready for anything, so I took some things into my hands. I had to, for I saw we had to act quick even at the risk of losing a bit of the maximum figure we had counted on. You see I realized the danger to us in Larry Brainard suddenly showing up, and his knowing, as he told us he did, who the sucker is that we've been stringing along. Anything might happen, any minute, from Larry Brainard that would upset everything. So I reasoned that we had to collect quick or run the risk of never getting a nickel."

"Some bean you've got, Maggie," he said admiringly. "Keep your foot on the gas pedal."

"What I did was only the carrying-out of the plan you had decided on — of course carrying it out quicker, and with a few little changes that the urgent situation demanded. After he proposed I broke down, as per schedule, and confessed that I had deceived him to the extent that I was already married. Married to a man I did n't love, and who did n't love me, but who was a tight-wad and who would n't let me go unless he saw a lot of money in it for him. And I gave Dick all the rest of the story, just as we had doped it out."

"Great work, Maggie! How did he take it?"

"Exactly as we figured he would. He was sorry for me; it did n't make any difference at all in his feelings for me. He'd buy my husband off — give him any price he wanted — and just so I would n't have to feel myself bound to such a man a minute longer than necessary he'd make a bargain with him at once and pay him part of the money right down. To-night, if he could get in touch with my husband. And so, Barney, since we had to act quick and there was no time to bring in another man that I could pass off as my husband, I confessed to him that I was married to you."

"To me!" exclaimed Barney.

"And he's coming here in less than an hour, with real money in his pockets, to see if he can't fix a deal with you."

"Me!" exclaimed the startled Barney again. His beady eyes glowed at her ardently. "Gee, you know I wish I really was married to you, Maggie! If I was, you bet money could n't ever pry you loose from me!"

"Well, there's the whole lay-out, Barney. It's up to you to be my grasping, bargaining, unloving husband for about an hour."

"I had n't thought of myself in that part," he objected.

"I'd figured that we'd bring in a new man to be the husband. It's pretty dangerous for me, my stringing Dick along all this while and then suddenly to enter the act as your husband — and to take the money."

"Dangerous!" There was sudden contempt in her voice and in her eyes. "So you're that kind of man, Barney — afraid! And afraid after my telling Dick you were my husband, and his swallowing the thing without a suspicion! Well, right this minute is when we call this deal off — and every other deal!"

"Oh, don't be so quick with that temper of yours, Maggie! I merely said it was dangerous. Of course I'll do it."

And then Barney asked, with a cunning he tried to hide: "But why did you ask me to have Old Jimmie show up here right after me? We don't need him."

"Just what's behind your saying that, Barney?" she demanded sharply.

He squirmed a little, then spoke the truth. "You don't love your father any too much, and he does n't love you any too much — I know that. He need n't really know how much we take off Sherwood; if he was n't here, he'd have to take our word for what we got and we'd tell him we got mighty little. Then the real money would be divided fifty-fifty between just you and me."

"I may not love my father, but he's in this on the same basis as you are, or I'm out of it," she declared. "I thought you might suggest something like this; that's one reason I asked you to have him come. Another reason — and this is something I forgot to tell you awhile ago — when I broke down and confessed everything to Dick Sherwood, I told Dick that Old Jimmie was really my guardian; and we both agreed that he should be present as a witness to any agreement, and to protect my interests. Still another reason is that since we had to work so fast, the thing to do was to split the money on the spot in three ways, and then each of us shoot off in a different direction to-night before any bad luck had a chance to break. In fact, Barney, this present minute is when you and I say our good-byes."

He forgot his scheme to defraud Old Jimmie in the far greater concern aroused by her last words. He leaned across the table and tried to take her hand, an attempt she deftly thwarted.

"But listen, Maggie," he asked with husky eagerness, "you and I are going to have an understanding to join up with each other soon, are n't we? You know what I mean — belong to each other. You know how I feel about you!"

This was the principal point Maggie had been maneuvering toward. Before her was the most difficult scene of the many which she had planned, on her successful management of which the success of everything seemed to depend. Within she was palpitant with the strain and suspense of it all; but on Barney she held cool, appraising eyes. In this splendid composure, her momentary withdrawal from him, she seemed to Barney more beautiful, more desirable, more indispensable, than at any time since he had discovered back at the Duchess's that Maggie was a find.

"Of course I know exactly what you mean, Barney," she responded with deliberation, bewitchingly alluring in her air of superiority. "I 've known for a long time you and I would have to have a real talk. Are you ready for a straight talk now?"

"As straight as you can talk it!"

"I 'll probably fall for some man and marry him. Every woman does. But if I marry him, it 'll be because I love him. But my marrying a man does n't mean I 'm going to go into business with him. I 'm not going to mix love with business — not unless the man is the right sort of man. Of course it would be better if the man I marry and the man I take on as a business partner were the same man — but I'm not going to take any risks. You understand me so far?"

"Surest thing you know. And every word you've said proves that your head is n't just something to look pretty with. Let me slip this over to you right at the start — I'm the right sort of man!"

"That's exactly what I want to find out," she continued, with her deliberation, with the air of sitting secure upon the highest level. "I know now what I can do. I've proved it. Now I'm going right ahead putting over big things. You once told me I had it in me to be the best ever — and I now know I can be. I know I've got to tie up with a man, and the man has got to be just as good in his way as I am in mine. Right there's where I'm in doubt about you. I said I was going to talk straight — and I'm handing it to you straight. I don't know how good you are."

"You mean you think I'm not big enough to work with you?"

"I mean exactly what I said. I said that I did n't really know how good you are, and that I was n't going to tie up with any man except the best in the business. You've hinted now and then at a lot of big things you've put across and how strong you were in certain quarters where it paid to be strong — but I really know mighty little about you, Barney. This present job has n't required you to do anything special, and all the really hard work I've done myself. Of course I know you are a good dancer, and clever with the ladies, and know how to pick up a sucker and string him along. But that's everything I do know. And there are hundreds of men who are good at these things. The man I tie up with has got to be good at a lot of other things — and I've got to *know* he's good!"

"Good at what other things, Maggie?" he asked with suppressed eagerness.

"He's got to be good at putting over all kinds of situations. I don't care how he does it. So clever at putting things over that no one ever guesses he's the man who did it. And he's got to be able to give me protection. You know what I mean. A woman in the game I'm going in for is absolutely through, as far as doing anything big is concerned, the minute she gets a police record. I've got to have a man who's able to stand between me and the police. And I've got to know from past performances that the man can do these things. Just large words about what he can do, or hints about what he has done, don't count for a nickel with me. This is plain, hard business I'm talking, Barney, and I don't mean to hurt your feelings when I tell you that you don't measure up in any way to the man I need."

It had been difficult for Barney to hold himself until she had finished. To start with, he had the vain man's constant itch to tell of his exploits, his dislike for the anonymity of his cleverness unjustly ascribed to some other man. And then Maggie had played upon him even more skillfully than she imagined.

"I'm exactly the man you need in every way!" he exploded.

"Those are just words," she said evenly. "I said I had to have something more than mere words."

"I'm ace-high with Chief Barlow!"

"You've got to be more explicit."

Barney was now all excitement. "Don't you get what that means? I've never been locked up once, and yet I've been pulling stuff all the time! And yet look how Larry Brainard, that the bunch thought was so clever, got hooked and was sent away. I guess you know the answer!"

"Again, Barney, I've got to ask you to be more explicit."

"Then the answer is that all the while I've been working on an understanding with Barlow. I guess that's explicit!"

"You mean," she said in her cool voice, "that you've been a stool-pigeon for Barlow?"

"Sure! — though I don't like the word. That's the only safe way of staying steady in the game — an understanding with the police. All there is to it is now and then to tip the police off about some dub of a crook: of course you've got to be smooth enough not to let any one guess your game."

"That does n't seem to me such a strong talking point in your favor," she said thoughtfully.

"But don't you get the idea? I'm so strong with Barlow that I can get away with anything I want to. That means I can give you the protection from the police you just spoke about. See?"

"Yes, I see." Again she spoke thoughtfully. "But I told you I had to be shown. You must have done some pretty big things to have got such a standing with Barlow. For example?"

"I could write you a book!" He laugned in his excited pride. "You ask for an example. I could hardly hold myself in awhile ago when you said you'd practically swung the present deal alone, and that I'd done almost nothing. Why, Maggie, I did just one smooth little thing without which there could n't have been any deal."

"What?"

"You'll admit that nothing would have been safe with Larry Brainard determined to butt in on what you did?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm the little guy that fixed Larry Brainard so he would n't hurt any one!"

"You did that?" For the first time Maggie showed what seemed to be a live interest. "How?"

"How? You'll say it was clever when you learn how. And you'll say that I'm the man you want on that count of being able to put over a situation so that no one will ever guess I'm the man who did it. You'll admit that putting Larry Brainard out of business, so he'd stay out, was certainly a stiff job — for though I don't like him, I admit that Larry is one wise bird. One thing I did was to suggest to Barlow that he force Larry to become a police stool. I knew Larry would refuse, and I figured out everything else exactly as it has happened. I ask you, was n't that putting something clever over?"

"It certainly was clever!" admired Maggie.

"Wait! That's only half. To finish Larry off so that he would n't have a chance I had to finish him off not only with the cops, but also with his pals. So I tipped off Barlow to the game Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt were pulling and —"

"Then Larry Brainard really did n't do that?"

"No; I did it! Listen — there's some more to it. I spread the word, so that it seemed to be a leak from the Police Department, that it was Larry who had squealed on Red Hannigan and Jack Rosenfeldt. Did his old pals start out to get Larry? Well, now, did they! If I do say it myself, that was smooth work!"

"It was wonderful!" agreed Maggie.

"And there's still more, Maggie! You remember that charge of stick-up and attempted murder of a Chicago guy that the police are trying to land Larry on? I put that over! I'm the party that was messed up in that. I was trying to put over a neat little job all on my own; but something went wrong just as I thought I was cleaning out the sucker, and I had to be rough with that Chicago guy in order to make a get-away from him. I beat it straight to Barlow, and said that right here was the chance to fasten something on Larry. Barlow took my tip. My foot may have slipped on the original job, but my bean certainly did act quick, and you've got to admit I turned an apparent failure into something bigger than success would have been. And that's certainly traveling!"

"It certainly is!"

"And now, Maggie"— Barney pressed her eagerly — "I 've shown you I 'm just the sort you said a man had to be for you to tie up with him. I've shown you I can guarantee you police protection. And I 've shown you I 'm able to put over clever situations without any one ever guessing I 'm the party who put 'em over. I fit all your specifications! How about our settling right now to join up some place — Toronto 's the best bet — say three days after we make our get-away after to-night's clean-up? Let's be quick about this, Maggie — before Old Jimmie comes in. He's due any minute now!"

"Is n't that him at the door now?" breathed Maggie.

Both waited intently for a moment. But though she pretended so, Maggie's interest was not upon the outer door. Her attention was fixed, as it had been with sickening fear this last minute, upon that half-inch crack in the closet door behind Barney. Why had she, in her dismayed urgence, allowed Larry to possess himself of that closet key? — when her plan had been to keep Hannigan as well as Barlow forcibly behind the scenes until she had acted out her play? She now hoped almost against hope that Hannigan would not burst forth and ruin what was yet to come. Since that door unluckily had to be unlocked, her one chance was given her by the presence of Larry. Perhaps Larry could perceive the larger things she was striving for, and in some way restrain Hannigan.

These thoughts were but an instant in passing through her brain. Barney's eyes came back from the outer door to her face. "That's not Old Jimmie yet."

"No," her lips said. But her brain was saying, since the crack still remained a half-inch crack, "Larry understands — he's holding back Red Hannigan!"

Barney returned swiftly to his charge. "How about Toronto, Maggie — say exactly seventy-two hours from now — the Royal Brunswick Hotel?"

Maggie realized she could no longer put him off if she were to keep him unsuspicious for the next hour. Besides, in her desperate disillusionment concerning herself, she did not care what happened to her, or what people might think of her, if only she could keep this play going till its final moment.

"Yes," she said — "if we each feel the same way toward each other when this evening's ended."

"Maggie!" he cried. "Maggie!" This time, when he exultantly caught at her hand, she dared not refuse it to him. And she felt an additional loathing for Barney's caress because she knew that Larry was a witness to it.

Indeed, it was difficult for Larry, at the sight of Maggie's hand in Barney's too eager palms, to hold himself in check; and to do this in addition to holding in check the slight, quivering Red Hannigan, whose collar and whose right wrist he had been gripping these last three minutes. For Larry, as Maggie had hoped, had dimly apprehended something of Maggie's plan, and he felt himself bound by the promise she had extracted from him, to let her go through with whatever she had under way; though he had no conception of her plan's extent, and could, of course, not know of the intention of her overwrought mind to give her plan its final touch in what amounted to her own self-destruction, and in her vanishing utterly out of the knowledge of all who knew her.

Another minute passed; then Larry heard three peculiar rings of the bell of the outer door — an obvious signal. Maggie answered the summons, and Larry saw Old Jimmie enter. There followed a rapid and compact conference between the three, the substance of which was the telling of Old Jimmie of the developments against Dick Sherwood which Maggie had a little earlier recited to Barney, together with instructions to Old Jimmie concerning his new rôle as Maggie's guardian. It seemed to Larry that he caught signs of uneasiness in Jimmie, but to all the older man nodded his head.

Presently there was a loud ring. "That's Dick!" exclaimed Barney in a whisper. "And mighty eager, too—shows that by being ahead of the time you set! Let him in, Maggie."

Maggie was startled by the ring, though she did not show it. She thought rapidly. She had definitely asked Dick to telephone before coming. Why had n't he telephoned? Perhaps something had happened to prevent it, or perhaps an idea had come to him by which their plan could be bettered without a telephone message. In either case, she and Dick might have to improvise and deftly catch cues tossed to each other, as experienced actors sometimes do without the audience ever knowing that a hiatus in the play has been skillfully covered.

Maggie stood up. "You both understand what you're to do?"

Both whispered "yes." Larry watched Maggie start across the room, his whole figure quivering with suspense as to what was going to happen when Dick entered. He was quite sure there was more here than appeared upon the surface, quite sure that Maggie did not intend that the business with Dick should work out as she had outlined. What could Maggie possibly be up to? he asked himself in feverish wonderment, and could find no answer. For of course Larry had no knowledge of that most important fact: that Maggie had actually made a confession to Dick — not the fraudulent confession she had told Barney of — but an honest and complete confession, and that in consequence she and Dick were working in coöperation.

From his crack Larry could not quite see the outer door. But after she opened the door he saw Maggie fall back with an inarticulate cry, her face suddenly blanched with astounded fright. And then Larry experienced one of the greatest surprises of his life—a surprise so unnerving that he almost loosed his hold upon Red Hannigan. For instead of Dick there walked into the room the tall, white-haired figure of Joe Ellison, and Joe's lean, prison-blanched face was aquiver with a devastating purpose. How in the name of God had Joe come to be here? — and what did that terrible look portend?

But Larry's surprise was but an unperturbing emotion compared to the effect of her father's appearance, with his terrible face, upon Maggie. Life seemed suddenly to go out of her. She realized that the clever play which she had constructed so rapidly, and upon which she had counted to clear the tangle for which she was in part responsible, and to bring her back in time as the seeming fulfillment of the dream of a happy and undisillusioned father — she realized that her poor, brilliant play had come to an instant end before it was fairly started, and that the control of events had passed into other hands.

CHAPTER XXXV

At the entrance of Joe Ellison instead of the expected Dick, Barney and Old Jimmie had sprung up from the table in amazement. Joe strode past Maggie, hardly heeding his daughter, and faced the two men.

"I guess you know me, Jimmie Carlisle!" said Joe with a terrifying restraint of tone. "The pal I trusted — the pal I turned everything over to — the pal who double-crossed me in every way!"

"Joe Ellison!" gasped Jimmie, suddenly as ghastly as a dead man. "I — I did n't know you were out."

"I'm out, all right. But I'll probably go in again for what I'm going to do to you! And you there" — turning on Barney — "you're got up enough like a professional dancer to be the Barney Palmer I've heard of!"

"What business is it of yours who I am?" Barney tried to bluster. "Perhaps you won't mind introducing yourself."

"I'm the man who's going to settle with you and Old Jimmie Carlisle! Is that introduction enough? If not, then I'm Joe Ellison, the father of this girl here you call Maggie Carlisle and Maggie Cameron, that you two have made into a crook."

"Your daughter!" exclaimed Barney in stupefaction. "Why, she's Jimmie Carlisle's —"

"He's always passed her off as such; that much I've learned. Speak up, Jimmie Carlisle! Whose daughter is this girl you've turned into a crook?"

"Your daughter, Joe," stammered Old Jimmie. "But about my making her into a crook — you're — you're all wrong there."

"So she's not a crook, and you did n't make her one?" demanded Joe with the calm of unexploded dynamite whose fuse is sputtering. "I left you about twelve or fifteen hundred a year to bring her up on — as a decent, respectable girl. That's twenty-five or thirty a week. If she's not a crook, how can she on twenty-five a week have all the swell clothes I've seen her in, and be living in a suite like this that costs from twenty-five to fifty a day? And if she is n't a crook, why is she mixed up with two such crooks as you? And if she is n't a crook, why is she in a game to trim young Dick Sherwood?"

The two men started and wilted at these driving questions. "But — but, Joe," stammered Old Jimmie, "you've gone out of your head. She's not in any such game. She never even heard of any Dick Sherwood."

"Cut out your lies, Jimmie Carlisle!" Joe ordered harshly. "We've got something more to do here, the four of us, than to waste any time on lies. And just to prove to you that your lies will be wasted, I'll lay all my cards face up on the table. Since I got out I've been working for the Sherwoods. Larry Brainard was working there before me, and got me my job. I've seen this girl here — my daughter that you've made into a crook — out there twice.

Dick Sherwood was supposed to be in love with her. At the end of this afternoon some officers came to the Sherwoods' and arrested Larry Brainard. I was working outside, overheard what was happening, and crept up on the porch. Officer Gavegan, who was in charge, found a painting among Larry Brainard's things. Miss Sherwood said that it was a picture of Miss Maggie Cameron who had been visiting there, and I could see that it was. Officer Gavegan said it was a picture of Maggie Carlisle, daughter of Jimmie Carlisle, and that she was a crook. Larry Brainard, cornered, had to admit that Gavegan was right. I guessed at once who Maggie Carlisle was, since she was just the age my girl would have been and since you never had any children. And that's how, Jimmie Carlisle, standing there outside the window," concluded the terrible voice of Joe Ellison, "I learned for the first time that the baby I'd trusted with you to be brought up straight, and that I believed was now happy somewhere as a nice, decent girl, you had really brought up as your own daughter and trained to be a crook!"

Old Jimmie shrank back from Joe's blazing eyes; his mouth opened spasmodically, but no words came therefrom. There was stupendous silence in the room. Within the closet, Larry now understood that low, strange sound he had heard on the Sherwoods' porch and which Gavegan and Hunt had investigated. It had been the suppressed cry of Joe Ellison when he had learned the truth — the difference between his dreams and the reality. He could not imagine what that moment had been to Joe: the swift, unbelievable knowledge that had seemed to be tearing his very being apart.

Larry had an impulse to step out to Joe's side. But just as a little earlier he had felt the scene had belonged to Maggie, he now felt that this situation, the greatest in Joe's life, belonged definitely to Joe, was almost sacredly Joe's own property. Also he felt that he was about to learn many things which had puzzled him. Therefore he held himself back, at the same time keeping his hold upon Red Hannigan.

During this moment of silence, while Larry was wondering what was going to happen, his eyes also took in the figure of Maggie, all her powers of action and expression still paralyzed by appalling consternation. He understood, at least to a degree, what she was going through. He knew this much of her plan: that she had intended to cut loose in some way from Barney and Old Jimmie, and that she had intended that her father should continue to cherish the dream that had been his happiness for so long. And now her father had come upon her in the company of Barney and Old Jimmie and in a situation whose every superficial circumstance was such as to make him believe the worst of her!

Joe turned on the smartly dressed Barney. "I'll take you first, you imitation swell, because I'm saving Jimmie Carlisle to the last!" went on Joe's crunching voice. "I'm going to twist your damned neck for what you've helped do to my girl, but if you want to say anything first, say it."

Barney's response was a swift movement of his right hand toward his left armpit. But Barney Palmer, like almost all his kind, was a very indifferent gunman; and he had no knowledge of the reputation for masterful quickness that had been Joe Ellison's twenty years earlier. Before his compact automatic was fairly out of its holster beneath his armpit, it was in Joe Ellison's hands.

"I sized you up for that kind of rat and was watching you," continued Joe in his same awful grimness. "I'm not going to shoot you, unless you make me. I'm going to twist that pretty neck of yours. But first, out with anything you've got to say for yourself!"

"I haven't had anything to do with this business," said Barney, trying to affect a bold manner.

"You lie! I know that in this game against Dick Sherwood, in which you used my girl, you were the real leader!"

"Well — even if I did use your girl, I only used her the way I found her."

"You lie again! I know how your kind work: cleverly putting crooked ideas into girls' minds, and exciting their imagination, so they'll work with you. Your case is closed." He turned to his one-time friend. "What have you got to say for yourself, Jimmie Carlisle?"

Old Jimmie believed that his last hour was come. He showed something of the defiant, almost maniacal courage of a coward who realizes he can retreat no farther.

"What I got to say, Joe Ellison," he snarled in a sudden rage which bared his yellow teeth, "is that I'm even with you at last!"

"Even with me? What for?"

"For the way you double-crossed me in nineteen-one in that Gordon business. You never gave me a dime — said the thing had fallen down — yet I know there was a big haul!"

"I told you the truth. That Gordon thing was a fizzle."

"There's where you're lying! It was a clean-up! And I knew you'd been cheating me out of my share in other deals!"

"You're absolutely wrong, Jimmie Carlisle. But if you thought that, why did n't you have it out with me at the time?"

"Because I knew you would lie! You were a better talker than I was, and since our outfit always sided with you, I knew I would n't have a chance then. But I reasoned that if I kept quiet and kept on being your friend, I'd get my chance to get even if I waited awhile. I waited — and I certainly got my chance!"

"Go on, Jimmie Carlisle!"

And Old Jimmie went on — a startlingly different Old Jimmie, his pent-up evil now loosed into quivering, malignant triumph; went on with the feverish exultation of a twisted, perverted mind that has brooded long over an imagined injustice, that has brooded greedily and long in private over his revenge, and at last has his chance to gloat in the open.

"When you were sent away, Joe Ellison, and turned over your daughter to me with those orders about seeing that she was brought up as a decent girl, I began to see the big chance I'd been waiting for. I asked myself, What is the dearest thing in the world to Joe Ellison? The answer was, this idea he'd got about his girl. I asked myself, What is the biggest way I can get even with Joe Ellison? The answer was, to make Joe Ellison believe all the time he's in stir that his girl is growing up the way he wants her to be and yet to bring her up the exact thing he did n't want her to be. And that's exactly what I did!"

"You — did — such a thing?" breathed Joe Ellison, almost incredulous.

"That's exactly what I did!" Old Jimmie went on, gloatingly. "It was easy. No one knew you had a daughter, so I passed her off as my own baby by a marriage I'd not told any one about. I saw that she always lived among crooks, looked at things the way crooks do, and grew up with no other thought than to be a crook. I never had an idea of using her myself, till she began to look like such a good performer this last year; and then my idea, no matter what Barney Palmer may have planned, was to use her only in a couple of stunts. My main idea always was, when you came out with your grand idea of what your girl had grown up to be, for you suddenly to see your girl, and know her as your girl, and know her to be a crook. That smash to you was the big thing to me — what I'd planned for, and waited for. I did n't expect the blow-off to come like this; I did n't expect to be caught in it when it did happen. But since it has happened, well — There 's your daughter, Joe Ellison! Look at her! Look at what I 've made her! I guess I 'm even all right!"

"My God!" breathed Joe Ellison, staring at the lean face twisting with triumphant malignancy. "I did n't think there could be such a man!"

He slowly turned upon Maggie. This was the first direct recognition he had taken of her since his entrance.

"I don't suppose you can guess what your being what you are has meant to me," he began in a numbed tone which grew accusingly harsh as he continued. "But I 'd think that a daughter of mine, with such a mother, would have had more instinctive sense than to have gone into such a game with such a pair of crooks!"

"It 's true — I have been what you think me — I did go into this thing against Dick Sherwood," Maggie responded in a voice that at first was faltering, then that stumbled rapidly on in her eagerness to pour out all the facts. "But — but Larry Brainard had kept after me — and finally he made me see how wrong I was headed. And then, this afternoon, before I spoke to you, Larry told me that you were my real father. When I learned the truth — how I had been cheated out of being something else — how I was the exact opposite of what you had wanted me to be and believed me to be — I felt about it almost exactly as you feel about it. I — I made up my mind to clear up at once all the wrong I was responsible for — and then disappear in such a way that you 'd never have your dream of me spoiled. And so — and so this afternoon, after I left Cedar Crest, I confessed the whole truth to Dick Sherwood — about our plan to cheat him. And like the really splendid fellow he is, Dick Sherwood offered to help me set straight the things I wanted to set straight. Particularly to clear Larry Brainard. And so my being here as you find me is part of a plan between Dick Sherwood and myself. It's really a frame-up. A frame-up to catch Barney Palmer and Jimmie Carlisle."

"A frame-up!" ejaculated these two in startled unison.

"How a frame-up?" demanded her father, no bit of the accusing harshness gone out of his voice.

"Our plan against Dick Sherwood was to have him propose to me, then for me to confess that I was really married to a mean sort of man I did n't love — the idea being that Dick would be infatuated enough to pay a big sum to a dummy husband, and the three of us would disappear as soon as we got Dick's money. Dick offered to go through with the plan as Barney Palmer and Jimmie Carlisle had shaped it up — go through with it to-night — and then after money had passed, we 'd have a criminal case against them. By reminding him that Larry Brainard knew just what we were up to, and might spoil everything if we did n't act at once, I got Barney Palmer worked up to the point where he was going to pose as my husband and take the money. Dick Sherwood was to come a little later, after he'd first telephoned me, with a big roll of marked money."

There were stuttered exclamations from Barney and Old Jimmie, which were cut off by the dominant incisiveness of Joe Ellison's words to his daughter:

"I think you're lying to me! Besides, even if you're telling the truth, it's a pretty way you've taken to clear things up! Don't you see that by letting Dick Sherwood come here and play such a part, you'd be dead sure to involve him and his family in a dirty police story that the papers of the whole country would play up as a sensation? It's plain to any one that that's no way a person who wanted to square things would use Dick Sherwood. And that's why I think you're lying!"

"I had thought of that — you're right," said Maggie.

"And so I was n't going to do it. He was going to telephone me — just about this time — and when he called up I was going to fake his message. I was going to tell Barney Palmer and Old Jimmie that Dick had just telephoned he was n't coming, because one of the two had just sold him a tip for ten thousand dollars that this was a crooked game. I thought this would have started a quarrel between the two; they are suspicious of each other, anyhow. Each would have accused the other, and in their quarrel they would have been likely to have let out a lot of truth that would have completely given each other away."

"Not a bad plan at all," commented Joe Ellison. He tried to peer deep into his daughter for a moment, his inflamed face relaxing neither in its harshness nor its doubt of her. "But since you are the clever crook I actually know you to be from your work on Dick Sherwood, and since Jimmie Carlisle says he has trained you to be a crook, I believe that everything you 've told me is just something you 've cleverly invented on the spur of the moment — just so many lies."

"But — but —"

She broke off before the harsh, accusing doubt of his pale face. For a fraction of a moment no one spoke. Then the telephone bell began to ring.

"Dick!" breathed Maggie, and started for the telephone.

"Stay right where you are!" her father ordered. "I 'll answer that telephone myself, and see whether you 're lying to me about Dick Sherwood! . . . No, we 'll do this together. I 'll hold the receiver and hear what he says. You 'll do the talking and you 'll answer just what I tell you to, and you 'll keep your hand tight over the mouthpiece while I 'm giving you your orders. You two" — to Barney and Old Jimmie, with a significant movement of Barney's automatic — "you 'd better behave while this telephone business is going on."

The next moment Larry was hearing, or rather witnessing, the strangest telephone conversation of his experience. Maggie was holding the transmitter, and Joe had the receiver at his ears, grimly covering the two men with the automatic. Maggie obediently kept her palm tight over the mouthpiece during Joe's brief whispered directions, and no one in the room except Joe, not even Maggie, had the slightest idea of what was really passing over the wires.

What Larry heard was no more than a dozen most commonplace words in the world, transformed into the most absorbing words in the language. Joe ordered Maggie to answer with "hello" in her usual tone, which she did, and Joe, after a startled expression at the first words that came over the wire, listened with immobile face for four or five seconds. Then he nodded imperatively to Maggie and she put her hand over the mouthpiece.

"Ask him how much, and when he wanted it to be paid," he ordered.

"How much, and when does he want it to be paid?" repeated Maggie.

Again Joe listened for several moments; and then ordered as before: "Say 'Yes.'"

"Yes," said Maggie.

Another period of waiting, and Joe ordered: "Say, 'I've got a much better plan that supersedes the old.'"

"I've got a much better plan that supersedes the old."

There was yet another period of waiting, then Joe commanded: "Tell him he really must n't and say good-bye quick."

"You really must n't! Good-bye!"

The instant her "Good-bye" was out of her mouth Joe clicked the receiver upon its hook, and stood regarding the breathless Maggie. His pale, stern face was not quite so severe as before. Presently he spoke:

"I know now that you really were sick of what you'd been trying to do — that you'd really broken away from these two — that you'd really confessed to Dick, and are now all square with him."

The word "Father!" struggled chokingly toward her lips. But she only said:

"I'm glad — you know."

"And you were shrewd in that guess you made of what one of these two would do." Joe crossed back to Barney and Old Jimmie. "You two must have been almighty afraid, because of Larry Brainard, that your game was suddenly collapsing, and each must have been trying to grab a piece for himself before he ran away."

"What you talking about?" gruffly demanded Barney.

"Perhaps I'm talking about you. But more particularly about Jimmie Carlisle. For just now Dick Sherwood said when he telephoned, that an hour or two ago Jimmie Carlisle had hunted him up, had hinted that he was going to lose a lot of money unless he was properly advised, and offered to give him certain valuable information for five thousand cash."

Barney turned upon his partner. "You damned thief!" he snarled, tensed as if about to spring upon the other.

Old Jimmie, turned greenishly pale, shrank away from Barney, his every expression proclaiming his guilt. Then Maggie again found her voice:

"And at about the same time Barney was trying to double-cross Jimmie Carlisle, Barney proposed to me that, after we'd got Dick Sherwood's money, we'd tell Jimmie Carlisle we'd got very little, and divide the real money fifty-fifty between just us two."

"You damned thief!" snarled Old Jimmie back at his partner.

The next moment Barney and Old Jimmie were upon each other, striking wildly, clawing. But the moment after Joe Ellison, his repressed rage now unloosed, and with the super-strength of his supreme fury, had torn the two apart.

"You don't do that to each other — that job belongs to me!" he cried. His right arm flung Barney backward so that Barney went staggering over himself and sprawled upon the floor. Joe gripped Old Jimmie's collar, and his right hand painfully twisted Jimmie's arm. "And I finish you off first, Jimmie Carlisle, for what you've done to me and my girl! But for Larry Brainard you, Jimmie Carlisle, would have succeeded in your scheme to make my girl a crook! I'd like to give you a thousand years of agony, you damned rat — but that's beyond me!" His right hand shifted swiftly from Old Jimmie's arm to his throat. "But I'm going to choke your rat's life out of you! — your lying, sneaking devil's life out of you!"

Old Jimmie squirmed and twisted with those long fingers clamped mercilessly around his throat, his eyes rolling, and his mouth gaping with voiceless cries. He was indeed being shaken as a rat might be shaken.

"Don't! — Don't!" cried the frantic Maggie, and started to seize her father to pull him away. But she was halted by her arm being caught by Barney.

"Let Jimmie have it!" he said fiercely to her, and flung her to the farthest corner of the room. And grimly exultant over what seemed to be Old Jimmie's doom, he started for the door to make his own escape.

Up to the moment of Joe Ellison's eruption Larry had felt bound to remain a mere spectator where he was: long as the time had seemed to him, it had in fact been less than half an hour. He had felt bound at first by his promise to Maggie to let her work out her plan; and bound later by his sense that this situation belonged to Joe Ellison. But now this swift crisis dissolved all such obligations. He sprang from his closet to take his part in the drama that was so swiftly unfolding.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LARRY caught and whirled around Barney Palmer just as the hand of the escaping Barney was on the knob of the outer door.

"No, you don't, Barney Palmer!" he cried. "You stay right here!"

Startled as Barney was by this appearance of his dearest enemy, he wasted no precious time on mere words. He swung a vicious blow at Larry, intended to remove this barrier to his freedom. But the experienced Larry let it glance off his forearm, and with the need of an instantaneous conclusion he sent a terrific right to Barney's chin. Barney staggered back, fell in a crumpled heap, and lay motionless.

Sparing only the fraction of a second to see that Barney was momentarily out of it, Larry sprang upon Joe Ellison and tried to break the deadly grips Joe held upon Old Jimmie.

"Stop, Joe — stop!" he cried peremptorily. "Your killing Jimmie Carlisle is n't going to help things!"

Without relaxing his holds, Joe turned upon this interferer.

"Larry Brainard! How'd you come in here?"

"I've been here all the time. But, Joe — don't kill Jimmie Carlisle!"

"You keep out — this is my business!" Joe fiercely replied. "If you've been here all the time, then you know what he's done to me, and what he's done to my girl! You know he deserves to have his neck twisted off — and I'm going to twist it off!"

Larry perceived that Joe's sense of tremendous injury had made him for the moment a madman in his rage. Only the most powerful appeal had a chance to bring him back to sanity.

"Listen, Joe — listen!" he cried desperately, straining to hold back the other's furious strength from its destructive purpose. "After what's happened, every one is bound to know that Maggie is your daughter! Understand that, Joe? — every one will know that Maggie is your daughter! It's not going to help you to be charged with murder. And think of this, Joe — what's it going to do to your daughter to have her father a murderer?"

"What's that?" Joe Ellison asked dazedly.

Larry saw that his point had penetrated to the other's reason. So he drove on, repeating what he had said.

"Understand this, Joe? — every one will now know that Maggie is your daughter! You simply can't prevent their knowing that now! Remember how for over fifteen years you've been trying to do the best you could for her! Do you now want to do the worst thing you can do? The worst thing you can do for Maggie is to make her father a murderer!"

"I guess that's right Larry," he said huskily. "Thanks."

He pushed the half-strangled Jimmie Carlisle away from him. "You'll get yours in some other way!" he said grimly.

Old Jimmie, staggering, caught the back of a chair for support. He tenderly felt his throat and blinked at Larry and Joe and Maggie. He did not try to say anything. In the meantime Barney had recovered consciousness, had struggled up, and was standing near Old Jimmie. Their recognition that they were sharers of defeat had served to restore something of the sense of alliance between the two.

"Well, anyhow, Larry Brainard," snarled Barney, "you haven't had anything to do with putting this across!"

It was Joe Ellison who replied. "Larry Brainard has had everything to do with putting this across. He's been beating you all the time from the very beginning, though you may not have known it. And though he's seemed to be out of things for the last few hours, he's been the actual power behind everything that's happened up to this minute. So don't fool yourself — Larry Brainard has beaten you out at every point!"

A sense of triumph glowed within Larry at this. There had been a time when he had wanted the animal satisfaction which would have come from his giving violent physical punishment to these two — particularly to Barney. But he had no desire now for such empty vengeance.

"Well, I guess you've got nothing on me," Barney growled at them, "so I'll be moving along. Better come, too, Jimmie."

While he spoke a figure had moved from Larry's closet with the silence of a swift shadow. It's thin hand gripped Barney's shoulder.

"I guess *I've* got something on you!" it said.

Barney whirled. "Red Hannigan!" he gasped.

"Yes, Red Hannigan! — you stool — you squealer!" said Red Hannigan. "I heard you brag about being Barlow's stool, and I heard everything else you bragged about to Joe Ellison's girl. I'd bump you off right now if I had my gat with me and if I had any chance at a get-away. But I'll be looking after you, and the gang will be looking after you, till you die — the same as you set us after Larry Brainard! No matter what else happens to you, you'll always have that as something extra waiting for you! And when the time comes, we'll get you!"

As silently as he had appeared from the closet, as silently he let himself out of the room. The glowering features of Barney had faded to a pasty white while Hannigan had spoken, and now the hand which tried to bring a handkerchief to his lips shook so that he could hardly find his face. For none knew so well as Barney

Palmer how inescapable was this thing which would be hanging over him until the end of his days.

Before any one in the room could speak there came a loud pounding from within the door of the closet Larry and Red Hannigan had not occupied. "Oh, I'd completely forgotten!" exclaimed Maggie — and indeed she had forgotten all that was not immediately connected with the situation created by her father's unexpected entrance. She crossed and unlocked the door, and Barlow stepped out.

"Chief Barlow!" exclaimed the astonished Larry, and all the other men gazed at the Chief of Detectives with an equal surprise.

"He is part of my frame-up," Maggie explained at large. "I wanted both the police and Larry's old friends to know the truth at first hand — and clear him before I went away."

"Was n't that Red Hannigan who just spoke?" were Barlow's first words.

"Yes," said Larry.

Barney, and Old Jimmie as well, had perked up at the appearance of Barlow, as though at aid which had come just in time. But Barlow turned upon Barney a cold police eye.

"I heard you brag that you were my stool. That's a lie."

"Why — why — Chief — " Barney stammered. He had counted upon help here, where there had existed mutually advantageous relations for so long.

"I heard you say you had my protection. That's another lie. You've squealed on a few people, but I've never given you a thing."

Barney gasped at this. He knew, as every one in the room also knew, that Barlow was lying. But Barlow held all the cards. Rough and ruthless police politician that he was, he made it his business always to hold the highest cards. As sick of soul as a man can be, Barney realized that Barlow was doing exactly what Barlow always did — was swinging to the side that had the most evidence and that would prove most advantageous to him. And Barney realized that he was suffering the appointed fate of all stool-pigeons who are found out by their fellow criminals to be stool-pigeons. Such informers are of no further use, and according to the police code they must be given punishment so severe as to dissipate any unhealthy belief on the public's part that there could ever have been any alliance between the two.

"I've used this young lady who seems to have been Jimmie Carlisle's daughter and now seems to be the daughter of this old-timer Joe Ellison, for a little private sleuthing on my own hook," Barlow went on — for it was the instinct of the man to claim the conception and leadership of any idea in whose development he had a part. He spoke in a brusque tone — as why should he not, since he was addressing an audience he lumped together as just so many crooks? "Through this little stunt I pulled to-night, I've got on to your curves, Barney Palmer. And yours, too, Jimmie Carlisle. And I'm going to run the pair of you in."

This was too much for Barney Palmer. Even though he knew that his position as a stool, who was known to be a stool, was without hope whatever, he went utterly to pieces.

"For God's sake, Chief," he burst out frantically, "you're not going to treat me like that! You could get me out of this easy! Think of all I've done for you! For God's sake, Chief — for God's sake —"

"Shut up!" ordered Barlow, doubling a big fist.

Chokingly Barney obeyed. Old Jimmie, coward though he was, and lacking entirely Barney's quality of a bravo, had accepted the situation with the twitching calm of one to whom the worst has often happened. "Shut up," repeated Barlow, "and get it fixed in your beans that I'm going to run you two in."

"Run them in because of this Sherwood affair?" asked Larry.

"Surest thing you know. I've got all the evidence I need."

"But —" Larry was beginning protestingly, when the doorbell rang again. Maggie opened the door, and there entered Miss Sherwood, with Hunt just behind her, and Dick just behind him, and Casey and Gavegan following these three. All in the room were surprised at this invasion with the sole exception of Joe Ellison.

"When Mr. Dick spoke over the 'phone about your coming," he said to Miss Sherwood, "I asked you not to do it."

Barlow was prompt to speak, and the sudden change in his voice would have been amazing to those who do not know how the little great men of the Police Department, and other little great men, can alter their tones. He had recognized Miss Sherwood at once, as would any one else at all acquainted with influential New York.

"Miss Sherwood, I believe," he said, essaying a slight bow.

"Yes. Though I fear I have not the pleasure of knowing you."

"Deputy Barlow, head of the Detective Bureau of the Police Department," he informed her. "Entirely at your service."

"Just what is going on here?" she queried. "I know a part of what has happened" — she was addressing herself particularly to Maggie and Larry — "for Dick telephoned me about seven, and I came right into town. He told me everything he knew — which threw a different light on a lot of events — and Dick telephoned at about nine that I was coming over. But something more seems to have happened."

"Miss Sherwood, it's like —" began Barlow.

"Just a second, Chief," Larry interrupted. Larry knew what a sensational story this would be as it had developed — and he knew in advance just how it would be seized upon and played up by the newspapers. And Larry did not want unpleasant publicity for his friends (three in that room were trying to make a fresh start in life), nor for those who had been his friends. "Chief, do you want to make an arrest on a charge which will involve every person in this room in a sensational story? Of course I know most of us here don't weigh anything with you. But why drag Miss Sherwood, who is innocent in every way, into a criminal story that will serve to cheapen her and every decent person involved? Besides, it can only be a conspiracy charge, and there's more than a probability that you can't prove your case. So why make an arrest that will drag in Miss Sherwood?"

Barlow had a mind which functioned with amazing rapidity on matters pertaining to his own interest. He realized on the instant how it might count for him in the future if he were in a position to ask a favor of a person of Miss Sherwood's standing; and he spoke without hesitation:

"I don't know anything about this Sherwood matter. If any one ever asks me, they'll not get a word."

There was swift relief on the faces of Barney and Old Jimmie; to be instantly dispelled by Chief Barlow's next statement which followed his last with only a pause for breath:

"The main thing we want is to stick these two crooks away." He turned on Barney and Old Jimmie. "I've just learned you two fellows are the birds I want for that Gregory stock business. I've got you for fair on that. It'll hold you a hundred times tighter than any conspiracy charge. Casey, Gavegan — hustle these two crooks out of here."

The next moment Casey and Gavegan had handcuffs on the prisoners and were leading them out.

"Good for you, Larry," Casey whispered warmly as he went by with Barney. "I knew you were going to win out, though it might be an extra-inning game!"

At the door Barlow paused. "I hope I've done everything all right, Miss Sherwood?"

"Yes — as far as I know, Mr. Barlow."

Again Barlow started out, and again turned. "And you, Brainard," he said, rather grudgingly, "I guess you need n't worry any about that charge against you. It'll be dropped."

And with that Barlow followed his men and his prisoners out of the room.

Then for a moment there was silence. As Larry saw and felt that moment, it was a moment so large that words would only make a faltering failure in trying to express it. He himself was suddenly free of all clouds and all dangers. He had succeeded in what he had been trying to do with Maggie. A father and a daughter were meeting, with each knowing their relationship, for the first time. There was so much to be said, among all of them, that could only be said as souls relaxed and got acquainted with each other.

It was so strained, so stupendous a moment that it would quickly have become awkward and anti-climacteric but for the tact of Miss Sherwood.

"Mr. Brainard," she began, in her smiling, direct manner, with a touch of brisk commonplace in it which helped relieve the tension, "I want to apologize to you for the way I treated you late this afternoon. As I said, I've just had a talk with Dick and he's told me everything — except some things we may all have to tell each other later. I was entirely in the wrong, and you were entirely in the right. And the way you've handled things seems to have given Dick just that shock which you said he needed to awaken him to be the man it's in him to be. I'm sure we all congratulate you."

She gave Larry no chance to respond. She knew the danger, in such an emotional crisis as this, of any let-up. So she went right on in her brisk tone of ingratiating authority.

"I guess we've all been through too much to talk. You are all coming right home with me. Mr. Brainard and Mr. Ellison live there, I'm their boss, and they've got to come. And you've got to come, Miss Ellison, if you don't want to offend me. I won't take 'no.' Besides, your place is near your father. Wear what you have on; in a half a minute you can put enough in a bag to last until to-morrow. To-morrow we'll send in for the rest of your things — whatever you want — and send a note to your Miss Grierson, paying her off. You and your father will have my car," she concluded, "Mr. Brainard and Dick will ride in Dick's car, and Mr. Hunt will take me."

And as she ordered, so was it.

For fifteen minutes — perhaps half an hour — after it rolled away from the Grantham Hotel there was absolute stillness in Miss Sherwood's limousine, which she had assigned to Maggie and her father. Maggie was near emotional collapse from what she had been through; and now she was sitting tight in one corner, away from the dark shadow in the other corner that was her newly discovered father who had cared for her so much that he had sought to erase from her mind all knowledge of his existence. She wanted to say something — do something; she was torn with a poignant hunger. But she was so filled with pulsing desires and fears that she was impotent to express any of the million things within her.

And so they rode on, dark shadows, almost half the width of the deeply cushioned seat between them. Thus they had ridden along Jackson Avenue, almost into Flushing, when the silence was broken by the first words of the journey. They were husky words, yearning and afraid of their own sound, and were spoken by Maggie's father.

"I — I don't know what to call you. Will — will Maggie do?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"I'm — I'm not much," the husky voice ventured on; "but what you said about going away — for my sake — do you think you need to do it?"

"I've made — such a mess of myself," she choked out.

"Other people were to blame," he said. "And out of it all, I think you're going to be what — what I dreamed you were. And — and — "

There was another stifling silence. "Yes?" she prompted.

"I wanted to keep out of your life — for your sake," he went on in his strained, suppressed voice. "But — but if you're not ashamed of me now that you know all" — in the darkness his groping hand closed upon hers — "I wish you wouldn't — go away from me, Maggie."

And then the surging, incoherent thing in her that had been struggling to say itself this last half-hour, suddenly found its voice in a single word:

"Father!" she cried, and flung her arms around his neck.

"Maggie!" he sobbed, crushing her to him.

All the way to Cedar Crest they said not another word; just clung to each other in the darkness, sobbing — the first miraculous embrace of a father and daughter who had each found that which they had never expected to have.

CHAPTER XXXVII

It was ten the next morning at Cedar Crest, and Larry Brainard sat in his study mechanically going over his figures and plans for the Sherwood housing project.

For Larry the storms of the past few weeks, and the whirlwind of last night, had cleared away. There was quiet in the house, and through the open windows he could glimpse the broad lawn almost singing in its sun-gladdened greenness, and farther on he could glimpse the Sound gleaming placidly. Once for perhaps ten minutes he had seen the overalled and straw-hatted figure of Joe Ellison busy as usual among the flowers. He had strained his eyes for a glimpse of Maggie, but he had looked in vain.

Despite all that had come to pass at the Grantham the previous evening, Larry was just now feeling restless and rather forlorn. His breakfast had been brought to him in his room, and he had not seen a single member of last night's party at the Grantham since they had all divided up according to Miss Sherwood's orders and driven away; that is he had really seen no one except Dick.

Dick had gripped his hand when he had slipped in beside Dick in the low seat of the roadster. "You're all right, Captain Nemo!—only I'm going to be so brash as to call you Larry after this," Dick had said. "If you'll let me, you and I are going to be buddies."

He was all right, Dick was. Dick Sherwood was a thoroughbred.

And there was another matter which had pleased him. The Duchess had called him up that morning, had congratulated him in terms so brief that they sounded perfunctory, but which Larry realized had all his grandmother's heart in them, and had said she wanted him to take over the care of all her houses — those she had put up as bail for him. When could he come in to see her about this? . . . He understood this dusty-seeming, stooped, inarticulate grandmother of his as he had not before. Considering what her life had been, she also was a brick.

But notwithstanding all this, Larry was lonely — hungrily lonely — and was very much in doubt. Miss Sherwood had spoken to him fair enough the night before — yet he really did not know just how he stood with her. And then — Maggie. That was what meant most to him just now. True, Maggie had emerged safe through perils without and within; and to get her through to some such safety as now was hers had been his chief concern these many months. He wanted to see her, to speak to her. But he did not know what her attitude toward him would now be. He did not know how to go about finding her. He was not even certain where she had spent the night. He wanted to see her, yet was apulse with fear of seeing her. She would not be hostile, he knew that much; but she might not love him; and at the best a meeting would be awkward, with so wide a gap in their lives to be bridged. . . .

He was brooding thus when there was a loud knocking at his door. Without waiting for his invitation to enter, the door was flung open, and Hunt strode in leaving the door wide behind him. His face was just one great, excited grin. He gave Larry a thump upon the back which almost knocked Larry over, and then pulled him back to equilibrium by seizing a hand in both of his, and then almost shook it off.

"Larry, my son," exploded the big painter, "I've just done it! And I did it just as you ordered me to! Forgot that Miss Sherwood and I had had a falling out, and as per your orders I walked straight up to her and asked her. And Larry, you son-of-a-gun, you were right! She said 'yes'!"

"You're lucky, old man!" exclaimed Larry, warmly returning the painter's grip.

"And, Larry, that's not all. You told me I had the clearness of vision of a cold boiled lobster — said I was the greatest fool that ever had brains enough not to paint with the wrong end of an umbrella. Paid me some little compliment like that."

"Something like that," Larry agreed.

"Well, Larry, old son, you were right again! I've been a worse fool than all you said. Been blinder than one of those varnished skulls some tough-stomached people use for paper-weights. After she'd said 'yes' she gave me the inside story of why we had fallen out. And guess why it was?"

"You don't want me to guess. You want to tell me. So go to it."

"Larry, we men will never know how clever women really are!" Hunt shook his head with impressive emphasis. "Nor how they understand our natures — the clever women — nor how well they know how to handle us. She confessed that our quarrel was, on her part, carefully planned from the beginning with a definite result in view. She told me she'd always believed me a great painter, if I'd only break loose from the pretty things people wanted and paid me so much for. The trouble, as she saw it, was to get me to cut loose from so much easy money and devote myself entirely to real stuff. The only way she could see was for her to tell me I could n't paint anything worth while, and tell it so straight-out as to make me believe that she believed it — and thus make me so mad that I'd chuck everything and go off to prove to her that I damned well could paint! I certainly got sore — I ducked out of sight, swearing I'd show her — and, oh, well, you know the rest! Tell me now, can you think of anything cleverer than the way she handled me?"

"It's just about what I would expect of Miss Sherwood," Larry commented.

"Excuse me," said a voice behind them. "I found the door open; may I come in?"

Both men turned quickly. Entering was Miss Sherwood.

"Isabel!" exclaimed the happy painter. "I was just telling Larry here — you know!"

Miss Sherwood's tone tried to be severe, and she tried not to smile — and she succeeded in being just herself.

"I came to talk business with Mr. Brainard. And I'm going to stay to talk business with Mr. Brainard. But I'll give him five seconds for congratulations — provided at the end of the five seconds Mr. Hunt gets out of the room."

Larry congratulated the two; congratulated them as warmly as he felt his as yet dubious position in this company warranted. At the end of the five seconds Hunt was closing the door upon his back.

"I've always loved him — and I want to thank you, Mr. Brainard," she said with her simple directness. And before Larry could make response of any kind, she shifted the subject.

"I really came in to see you on business, Mr. Brainard. I hope I made my attitude toward you clear enough last night. If I did not, let me say now that I think you have made good in every particular—and that I trust you in every particular. What I wished especially to say now," she went on briskly, giving Larry no chance to stammer out his appreciation, "is that I wish to go ahead without any delay with your proposition for developing the Sherwood properties in New York City which we discussed some time ago. A former objection you raised is now removed: you are cleared, and are free to work in the open. I want you to take charge of affairs, with Dick working beside you. I think it will be Dick's big chance. I've talked it over with him this morning, and he's eager for the arrangement. I hope you are not going to refuse the offer this time."

"I can't — not such an offer as that," Larry said huskily. "But, Miss Sherwood, I did n't expect — "

"Then it's settled," she interrupted with her brisk tone. "There'll be a lot of details, but we'll have plenty of time to talk them over later." She stood up. "There are some changes here at Cedar Crest which I want begun at once and which I want you to supervise. If you don't mind we'll look things over now."

He followed beside her along the curving, graveled walks. She headed toward the cliff, but he had no idea where she was leading until a sharp turn brought them almost upon the low cottage which these last few weeks had been Joe Ellison's home.

"Here is where we start our changes," said the business-like Miss Sherwood. "The door 's open, so we might as well go right in."

They stepped into a tiny entry, and from thence into a little sitting-room. The room was filled with cut flowers, but Larry did not even see them. For as they entered, Maggie sprang up, startled, from a chair, and, whiter than she had been before in all her life, gazed at him as if she wanted to run away. She stood trembling and slender in a linen frock of most simple and graceful lines. It was Miss Sherwood's frock, though Larry did not know this; already it had been decided that all those showy Grantham gowns were never to be worn again.

Once more Miss Sherwood came to the rescue of a stupendous situation, just as her tact had rescued a situation too great for words the night before.

"Of course you two people now perceive that I'm a fraud — that I've got you together by base trickery. So much being admitted, let's proceed." She turned on Larry. "Maggie — we've agreed that I am to call her that — Maggie stayed with me last night. There are two beds in my room. But we did n't sleep much. Mostly we talked. If there's anything Maggie did n't tell me about herself, I can't guess what there's left to tell. According to herself, she's terrible. But that's for us to judge; personally I don't believe her. She confessed that she really loved you, but that after the way she'd treated you, of course she was n't fit for you. Which, of course, is just a girl's nonsense. I suppose you, Mr. Brainard, are thinking something of the sort regarding your own self. It is equally nonsense. You both love each other — you've both been through a lot — nothing of importance now stands between you — so don't waste any of your too short lives in coming together."

She took a deep breath and went on. "You might as well know, Mr. Brainard, that Maggie is going to live with me for the present — that, of course, she is going to be a very great burden to me — and it will be a great favor to me if you'll marry her soon and take her off my hands." And then the voice that had tried to keep itself brisk and even, quavered with a sudden sob. "For Heaven's sake, dear children — don't be fools!"

And with that she was gone.

For an instant Larry continued to gaze at Maggie's slender, trembling figure. But something approaching a miracle — a very human miracle — had just happened. All those doubts, fears, indecisions, unexpressed desires, agonies of self-abasement, which might have delayed their understanding and happiness for weeks and months, had been swept into nothingness by the incisive kindliness of Miss Sherwood. In one minute she had said all they might have said in months; there was nothing more to say. There was nothing left of the past to discuss. Before them was only the fact of that immediate moment, and the future.

Tremblingly, silently, Larry crossed to that trembling, silent figure in white. She did not retreat. Tremblingly he took her hands and looked down into her dark eyes. They were now flowing tears, but they met his squarely, holding back nothing. The look in her eyes answered all he desired to know just then, for he gathered her tight into his arms. Wordlessly, but with a sharp, convulsive sob, she threw her arms about his neck — and thus embracing, shaken with sharp sobs, they stood while the minutes passed, not a single word having been spoken. And so it was that these two, both children of the storm, at last came together. . . .

Presently Joe Ellison chanced to step unsuspectingly into the room. Seeing what he did, he silently tiptoed out. There was a garden chair just outside his door. Into this he sank and let his thin face fall into his hands. His figure shook and hot tears burned through his fingers. For his heart told him that his great dream was at last come true.

THE END

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